University of Alberta

Online Learning Communities: Cohort and Residency Experiences

by

Natasja Remigia Marijke Larson

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explored the experiences of an online learning community in a graduate education context with specific focuses on belonging to a cohort and a Residency Team, as well as the experiencing face-to-face residencies. The data collection method was semi-structured interviews. The research was based on the overall paradigm of interpretivism and guided by phenomenology. As such, the data were analyzed using an inductive approach informed by thematic analysis. To present the findings in relation to the literature, two commonly referred to constructs in relation to online learning communities were used: social capital and collaborative learning.

This research revealed that the experiences of this community were influenced by three structural design factors: 1) face-to-face meetings, 2) small group size, and 3) instructors as facilitators. These structures impacted the themes that arose: rapport, sharing, hesitation, time, trust, and support, with an overall core element of each theme being "relationships."

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Chapter One: Introduction

Educators often refer to the latest change trend in their field as "jumping on the bandwagon." In the 1990s and perhaps until recently, many educators thought alternative delivery was the latest bandwagon. Nothing can replace the traditional mode of teaching face-to-face in a classroom setting; can it? The idea of replacement and displacement had some people on edge. As time passed, so too did the notions of substituting traditional modes. Many educators have changed their perceptions to include alternative delivery formats in their ideas of learning environments. This new-age bandwagon comes fully loaded, so how can one refuse?

Virtual experiences are ever-present in our western society. Online dating, shopping, researching, surveying, and even "visiting" friends are just a few examples of how our daily social interactions have been influenced. Of course it only made sense then that the institutions that held their conceptions of traditional education so tight, started to let the lines blur by introducing online delivery. The evolution of the internet is indeed changing our learning environments to include virtual experiences of any traditional version of communication. Software is usually not an issue, however, changing our notion of the dynamics of teaching and learning is.

Traditional education has had time on its side in terms of understanding and experiencing these dynamics of teaching and learning. Definitions are not necessarily reexamined when the classroom setting of desks and walls has been everyone's reality. But luckily for the sake of education, change can bring notions to the forefront that have

gone long unrecognized. Online delivery is causing educators to ask important questions and hopefully entertain answers that resonate back to student learning. What are our notions of community? How do we experience community in defined groups?

Online delivery has opened doors for many students but perhaps most substantially for the increasing number of non-traditional, mature students in higher education. Many on-line students study part-time, working in courses around full time employment, family, and other restrictions, including time and location. Accessibility is an obvious concern for this group; thus adult students are drawn to the convenience and flexibility of Internet-based course delivery (Hamilton-Pennell, 2002; Roberts, 2000; Sweet, 2000). For universities who want to serve this population, online delivery makes economic sense.

"Is There A Body In This Class?" I thought this was an aptly named title for Friesen's (2002) chapter describing in detail his experience with his first online course using a text-based conferencing forum. Discomfort, hesitation, confusion, apprehension, and reluctance are all words I would use to explain the emotions that I felt were portrayed by this author's story. His experience was in a course where he did not know the other students or instructor, had never met them, and probably never would. His descriptive words interjected with actual examples of postings, creates a vivid picture in the reader's mind - this is not something that the author enjoyed. And I'm sure he's not alone. But what about the experiences of students who have met each other before going online?

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of an online learning community in a graduate education context. Specifically, it explored the experiences of belonging to a cohort and a Residency Team (small groups; defined below). The structure of face-to-face residencies were also explored as they related to experiencing an online learning community. The goal was not only to describe their experiences, but also to reflect on their words to gain greater insight into their situation.

The students, purposively chosen from the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program (described in detail later in the chapter) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, included learners in the Leadership and School Improvement strand who had either experienced two face-to-face residencies (were near the end of the program) or who had already graduated. The research was guided by phenomenology and utilized semi-structured interviews as a technique for data gathering. The data were analyzed using an inductive approach (Gall, Gall, and Borg, 2007; Patton, 2002), informed by thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). To present my findings in relation to the literature, I utilized a tactic suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994); I subsumed my themes into more general classes. This final organization allowed me to develop categories as a synthesis of my iterations with the themes.

Coming to the Questions

How do I find out what I want to know? Asking the 'right' questions for my research study was somewhat intimidating and elusive. It took me many conversations

with colleagues in my area, my supervisor, and with the literature before I was able to come to a main question that I could begin to work toward. This question, and the sub-questions, did evolve through the process as the conversations continued and as the research began. Because the topic of online learning communities is so vast and had many potential sub-categories, I found myself searching for what the literature had not told me yet, and for what my personal experiences while working with the MES students had left me pondering.

While there is a substantial amount of research on comparisons of traditional face-to-face courses with distance education delivery methods, from my readings I felt there is a gap in the research regarding the student experiences of online learning communities with a focus on the significance of the cohort structure and small groups. Further, when cohort models have been mentioned, usually as an aside, a shortcoming exists in the research. There is most often a failure to indicate what type of cohort grouping was in place, therefore limiting the audience's understanding of the data.

To date, most research on the area of online learning communities is based on case-studies of single courses and/or of undergraduate levels. Conrad (2002) recognized that it would be useful to our understanding of online community to hear the experiences of more learners qualitatively while at the same time noting that the cohort structure offers intriguing variations on the shape of community. Conrad (2005) also noted that research has also consistently called for further investigation into learners' perceptions and use of community. Through this literature and from my perception of satisfied MES

students, I wondered how the structures of the MES program influenced the experiences of these particular students.

Research Questions

My study aimed to answer the following research question: How do online graduate students experience cohort-based learning communities while being a member of a Residency Team? To aid in answering the main research question, I included the following sub-questions: What are the experiences of a Residency Team member? How might the Residency Team experiences compare with cohort experiences? How does a face-to-face residency influence online experience? How does each of these program structures connect to the notion of an online learning community?

Significance of the Study

Given the rate at which technology use has grown, it is not surprising that research has struggled to keep up with it. As a result, program decisions are often based on intuition, personal experience, and traditional instructional methods rather than on empirically-based research. Although many of the same underlying principles of teaching and learning still apply, online courses are qualitatively different from traditional, classroom-based courses. Among these differences are the roles of learning communities. The work had two main goals: (1) to extend research that will lend a richer and more nuanced understanding in the area of online communities and (2) to contribute knowledge to the growing field of alternative delivery graduate degree programs.

Information gained in this study is valuable in developing and improvising practioner-based alternative delivery programs due to their unique context and increasing popularity. This study will provide us with ways of thinking about online learning in fixed-group settings, away from the concepts of competition and individualization, and towards the concepts of community and collaboration. It will also be of practical benefit to individual online instructors in helping them to establish realistic expectations for online learning communities and where their potential might best be utilized.

Definition of Terms

The following terms used in this study require defining. They are listed in alphabetical order and appear throughout the thesis.

Cohort: consisting "of a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences" (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 401). The type of cohort that the MES program employs is an open or mixed cohort, in which students enroll in a core set of classes together and take additional course work to meet their own course requirements (Yerkes et al., 1995, p. 5). The core courses do not allow access for other students to join.

Collaborative learning: "a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect the abilities and contributions of their peers" (Panitz, 1996, para. 3).

Elluminate: Elluminate's web-conferencing system is a "real-time virtual classroom environment designed for distance learning and collaboration in academic institutions." (Elluminate, 2001, para. 1).). Elluminate adds the capability to have live audioconferencing discussions and dynamic interactions online. Instructors and students have the ability to share resources such as Powerpoint presentations, Word documents, and even do Web tours. Groups can be created, and can move into "breakout rooms" for smaller discussions. Concepts can be mapped out on a whiteboard where students can share their ideas.

Learning Community: In an effort to find a workable definition, I have chosen to use this: "a group of students and at least one educator who, for a while and motivated by common vision and will, are engaged in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge, abilities and attitudes" (Vision of learners in the 21st century, 1998).

Non-traditional student: "In addition to a group classified by age (24 and older), this categorization also includes students who are independent of their parents' support, part-time students, students without high school diplomas, and students who are single parents" (Kim, 2002, p. 77). These characterizations account for the competing demands of work, school, and family.

Online learning: the best definition that comes closest to the use of online learning that is promoted by the MES program is to define Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALNs): "ALNs are people networks for anytime and anywhere learning. ALN combines

self-study with substantial, rapid, asynchronous interactivity with others. In ALN, learners use computer and communications technologies to work with remote learning resources, including coaches and other learners, but without the requirement to be online at the same time" (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005, p. 5).

Residency Teams: We use this term in the MES program to indicate a smaller group structure that we form for the students. Groups average a size of 10 students and they are devised by aiming to get the widest range of experience, age, geographic location and job positions as well as a balance of gender. The residency teams (in their functional sense) stay together from the beginning of the program to the end, excluding option courses.

Social presence: "the person we become when we are online and how we express that person in virtual space" (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 28).

WebCT: the computer-mediated communication tool used in the MES program for course delivery and online discussion.

Context of the Research

The Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) is a cohort based graduate degree program developed by the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education in 2003. Initially the program was designed around a specialization in Leadership and School Improvement. The intent was to deliver a program to practicing educators that centered

on notions of teacher leadership and administrative leadership influenced by current educational issues. Students are able to focus many of their assignments and their final capping project on a specific area of interest within their context. The program's first cohort of 52 teachers and administrators began in the summer of 2004. Since that time, the MES program has included two more "strands." These are: Leadership and Educational Improvement, geared toward educators in the post-secondary context; and Leadership in Technology, where the focus is on technology leaders, or prospective leaders, in various capacities in the field of education.

The MES program was hardly an innovation; we studied alternative delivery programs that preceded the MES and we adopted structures that appeared to have worked well in similar contexts. Post-secondary institutions are continuing to experiment with appropriate responses to an influx of "non-traditional" students. These adult learners, many with active careers, bring a complex set of needs to bear on program design, as does the rapidly evolving educational technology that is so critical to much of our program delivery. To respond to these needs, the MES program employs a range of individuals. Most of our instructional staff are sessionals that are often emeriti from within the U of A's Faculty of Education. As well, we try to employ, without taxing the regular departments, current faculty members. We realized quickly that online teaching is time-intensive and that students wanted prompt and comprehensive feedback. To assist the instructors, we hire teaching assistants (TAs). The TAs range from current graduate students in other departments within the faculty to former MES students, in addition to myself.

Specifically, the program is accessible for rural/remote educators who do not have access to face-to-face programs, and for those whose contractual obligations make full-time study sabbaticals difficult or impossible. As a result, the program differs from a traditional masters degree program in a number of ways. Only four of eight required courses are face-to-face. These are delivered in two intensive, three-week summer residencies. The remaining required courses (and usually option courses) are completed online. The two option courses can be any graduate level course from an accredited university that is deemed appropriate for the individual student's program. Second, the MES program employs a cohort format. Students complete the program as a group, and take courses in the same sequence. We have had cohorts ranging from 17 to 62 students. Research (see for example Du, Zhang, Olinzock, & Adams, 2008) and the experiences of our colleagues suggested that 50-60 people could not work efficiently or build meaningful communities; therefore, smaller "teams" of 10-12 students are used within the large cohort group. Third, the MES is not a collection of courses chosen by students from a "grocery-list" of alternatives; instead, it is a deliberate program of study. Coursework is designed to move students stepwise toward the completion of site-based research projects within their own schools/districts.

The MES program was designed with social constructionist principles in mind. The online component of the program encourages and even mandates participation through dialogue. Due to the graduate level of the courses, students are often asked to read articles and then engage in an online dialogue to co-construct meaning. A variety of

dialogue prompts are used: student-led questions, instructor-led questions, and article questions. Students must engage each other in a reciprocal conversation – they are not to simply "post" a stand-alone response. Conversations are occurring in residency teams where we encourage the group to take care of its own members. This means making sure nobody is left out. Instructional teams moderate the discussions. They prompt, probe, encourage, question, critique, and guide the students through the formulation of meanings and knowledge construction. Students are encouraged through very direct expectations and objectives to do the same with each other.

Although assignments are often individually completed, students communicate and share information and ideas with their fellow colleagues. We see evidence of this online and we hear it in their conversations. Cooperative learning – where group members have teacher-defined roles – is not employed. There is a site-based research project at the core of the program. Four of the courses in the program have direct outcomes aligned with this project. Students have complete autonomy in choosing a topic area that is specific to an area of their interest but, of course, are guided by supervisors as well as the U of A Research Ethics Board on the details. The supervisor capacity is different from traditional programs in that MES usually has one faculty member advising a whole residency team instead of having individual students assigned. As well, because the research project extends over more than one course, the supervisor may be different for each course that is related to the project. This step-by-step model used to guide the students through the research was created out of the knowledge gained from the experiences of faculty members: knowing that if a student is not going to complete a

program, it is often during a research or final project phase. The graduation rate has been, on average, around 90%.

Background of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, one is aware that there is no such thing as objectivity. However, knowledge and assumptions should be acknowledged and presented to the reader. Because of my intimate connection with the program, I certainly possessed the "theoretical sensitivity" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) of a researcher that includes personal and professional experiences necessary to develop an awareness of subtleties in the meaning of data and the capacity to understand the context. Since being involved in the program from its inception, my position has ranged from administrative and financial duties to technology "expert" to course designer and teaching assistant. I have always had an interest in technology but never thought of myself as a "techie." When I took the position with the MES program, I was abandoning an elementary school teaching position that was supplemented by a part-time teaching role to an adult audience. I taught the basics of Windows and Microsoft Office in a face-to-face environment to adults. I knew from teaching these adults that this was the direction I wanted to head and the MES program was the perfect fit.

Previous to working with the MES program, my only experience with alternative delivery was the correspondence course I took in my undergraduate program where I mailed in my assignments. By admitting that I took a "traditional" correspondence course, I feel like I'm admitting that I'm old. However, although age is relative, I do not

think most people would view twenty-something as old. This indicates to me that there have been rapid and fundamental changes in our educational systems in the last decade.

I came into my position not knowing anything about online education. I didn't know what a content management system (CMS) was and had never heard the names WebCT, Blackboard, or Elluminate. But being a small program we had to learn fast and furiously, as there were only two of us "assisting" the Director. As the first alternative delivery program using this structure in the Faculty, we were able to discover and forge our own paths along the way. Having the ability to be directly involved with the content and the delivery provided me with two layers of learning. Admittedly, we sometimes made decisions that were not based on research findings but by trying to adapt what we knew about traditional education and apply it to our current context. Clearly we did not always make the best choice and thankfully our students were very forgiving when that was the case. It was a fun and exciting time; I had a myriad of new experiences and learnings.

Going "online" for the first time was relatively easy. We, the MES staff and instructors, had met the students in the summer. We developed a relationship with them; we knew their names, their context, their likes, and fears (well some of them)! It was a seamless transition, or at least from my perspective. And we did not hear too many complaints from this – what we considered to be a – "vocal" group. There were some initial glitches with the technology, which was to be expected, and we moved through it

successfully together. Thankfully, the transition from face-to-face summer residencies to online coursework has been easy, year after year.

Working online afforded me the experiences and necessary background knowledge to feel completely comfortable taking an online course toward my own master's degree. However, I did not expect my experience as a student to be so vastly different from my experience as a teaching assistant. The first course I took online as a student was one that required independence and self motivation. We were to complete required assignments by a specific deadline but the learnings took place independently. There were suggestions for guidance but the learner had to take the initiative. I don't recall if there were any discussions with other students in the course and the only direct contact with the instructor happened when help was requested.

Although I felt isolated in that online course, I did find out that I was a fairly self-motivated student. I learned a lot on my own and I enjoyed making discoveries. However, I missed the dialogue with fellow students and I knew I could have learned more had "we" been going through this "together." Therefore, I wanted to try it again. I took another course online, with a different feel. The course was structured more like our MES courses in that dialogue was the key ingredient to knowledge construction. The instructor was very 'present' and so were the students although none of us had met face-to-face. We had a chance to learn about each other in an introduction forum and we promptly began communicating about our readings. There was one group assignment and we were placed into groups of three. We had to work cooperatively to complete a task and it was

facilitated through technology due to the geographical distances between us. I had a good experience with my group and learnt more about them so that when I went back on the discussions after this group assignment, I was eager to read what they wrote. I felt that I "knew" them better than the others after working with them. I was intrigued by my reaction and wondered if anyone else felt the same way.

As such, I have witnessed many instances that caused me to ponder the notion of online community. Through my role in the MES program and my experience as an online student I have been privy to both perspectives. From general social postings online to formal course evaluations, students repeatedly bring up the notion of learning communities as an integral component to their graduate studies. My work was conducted with the assumption that learning communities did/do exist for the MES students.

I have presented my role as the researcher to give the reader an understanding of some of my experiences, beliefs, and values that influenced me as a researcher in this study. This will allow the reader to interpret the findings in relation to these factors. As a researcher, my role was to understand and interpret the experiences of the participants in a graduate alternative delivery program. Presenting my assumptions here was an attempt to increase the credibility of the study. As recommended by Fontana and Frey (2005), it is important to expose the author's biases and taken-for granted notions.

Thesis Format

The purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and definitions have been presented. The next chapter is a review of the literature on online learning communities, cohorts, and the two constructs: social capital and collaborative learning and how they related to online learning communities. In Chapter Three, my rationale for selecting qualitative methodology, the research design, and research standards are all presented. In Chapter Four I introduce the MES students, as well as the specific participants, and present the findings. The findings and their relation to the literature are then discussed in Chapter Five. And finally Chapter Six concludes with implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and my reflections on the process.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Method of Literature Review

By exploring the literature, I was able to identify gaps in knowledge and recognize the need for my research question. The approach I initially took for my literature review was to begin with a critical review of the relevant literature. The main topic was, of course, online learning communities; however this topic was very broad and included a vast amount of published literature. Therefore, my initial search of literature helped inform my study, but I did not align myself with a particular framework. Additional literature was reviewed following analysis and added to the literature review, as well as compared to the findings of my study, as presented in Chapter Five.

As mentioned above, online learning community literature is extensive, for that reason, several categories of studies were consulted and integrated into the literature review. The types of studies and sources included conceptual and research studies on the topics of online education, learning communities, cohorts, adult learning, collaborative learning, social capital, interaction, presence, and dialogue. Documents were located through ERIC searches, various database searches, and Internet searches. Most of the studies reviewed were carried out in Canada, the United States, and Australia. A smaller number of relevant documents were located in the United Kingdom and other countries in Europe. The studies selected represented a variety of methodological approaches and designs: case studies, field studies, ethnographic studies, theoretical studies, experimental studies, and conference papers. Studies were selected according to their relevance to the

research problem and whether the research contributed further understanding of the online learning communities.

Outline of Literature Review

This exploration of the literature begins with an introduction to online education, historically and theoretically. Two areas under constructivist learning theory that relate to online learning communities – social interaction and social presence – are then explained. Next, I distinguish between communities, learning communities, and online learning communities and expand on the importance of online learning communities. Cohorts are explained, followed by their relevance. Then, I provide details on collaborative learning and social capital along with their individual significance to the online learning community literature. Finally, I provide summaries for a number of online learning community studies that were particularly meaningful for my study.

Introduction to Online Education

History of Distance Education

With advances in technology, distance education has changed and grown since it was first introduced as an evolutionary development of correspondence education. Also known as distance learning, alternative education, or non-traditional education, it can be defined as "those forms of education in which organized learning opportunities are usually provided through a technical medium to learners who normally study individually, and removed from the teacher in both time and space" (Jarvis, 1993, p. 166). Various methods of conducting distance education exist, such as: independent studies,

audio or video-based courses, computer-assisted instruction (CAI), and computer-mediated instruction (CMI). CAI uses the computer as a self-contained teaching machine to present individual lessons. CMI describes computer applications that facilitate the delivery of instruction; these can include electronic mail, fax, real-time computer conferencing, and World-Wide Web applications. Computer-mediated instruction is often represented as computer-mediated conferencing (CMC), where learners and instructors are connected across barriers of time and location. This is often conducted through a learning management system (LMS); in the case of the MES program it was WebCT.

The MES program was developed, like many others in Canada, as the need became obvious that the vast majority of those who wanted to upgrade their education were already in the workforce. Traditional university programming is generally an inappropriate form of education for mature students, who have competing demands and commitments from families and jobs (Sweet, 2000). Although educational institutions are designing programs and courses that increase the access to education for this group of individuals, a digital divide does exist for those who lack technological competency and connection to the Internet (McClellan, 1998). Therefore, an increasing number of students, and therefore institutions, are looking to online education as a flexible effective alternative form of distance education.

Sweet (2000) studied the history of distance education in Canada and traced three generations that suggested advances in the approach to design, development, and

delivery. The first generation was mainly focused on traditional correspondence[1]; the second generation on correspondence supplemented with telephone conversations between tutor and student; and the third generation was expanding the potential of communication technologies to construct more interactive and collaborative learning environments. The learner had the opportunity to construct knowledge through a process of discussion and interaction with both other learners and teachers (Michailidou & Economides, 2003). With a shift from dissemination goals to development goals, the focus moved to learning that facilitated intellectual growth through the requirement of greater instructor involvement, as well as high levels of interaction and dialogue with other students (Sweet, 2000).

Influence of Constructivist Learning

The thrust of CMC acknowledged that online adult learning came from a constructivist perspective. Merriam, Cafferella, and Baumgartner (2007) claimed that all forms of constructivism understand learning to be an active rather than a passive endeavor; that the beginning is the learner's interaction with an experience; and that learning occurred through dialogue, collaborative learning, and cooperative learning. Harasim (1990) points out that CMC supported and facilitated collaborative learning: "Collaborative or group learning is premised upon a learner-centered model that treats the learner as an active participant" (p. 43). In this study the goal of a face-to-face graduate seminar was knowledge building and sense-making which were also imperative outcomes of online education.

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[1] Traditional correspondence refers to education whereby the student is "physically separated from the teacher; separated in time from the teacher; and learns independent of contact with the teacher or with other students. (Barker, Frisbie, & Patrick, 1989).

Although CMC can include synchronous activity, the focus of my study occurred around asynchronous conferencing. Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN's) are people networks for anytime and anywhere learning. "ALN combines self-study with substantial, rapid, asynchronous interactivity with others. In ALN learners use computer and communications technologies to work with remote learning resources, including coaches and other learners, but without the requirement to be online at the same time" (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005, p. 5). The medium's inherent support of a learner-centered environment promoted the use of "many-to-many" communication by assuming that the teacher's authority role was modified to be a facilitator (Mason & Kaye, 1990). This aligned with constructivist learning theories that described the instructor's role as that of facilitator who negotiates meaning-making with the learner (Merriam, Cafferella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

The literature that I retrieved and that was related to online environments under the theoretical framework of constructivist learning theory branched into numerous areas thereafter. Areas that were included follow (examples of each are included): social presence (Tu & McIssac, 2002), group dynamics (Jacques & Salmon, 2007), communication (Nunan, 1993), learning networks (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997), collaborative learning (Roberts 2005), cooperative learning (Paulus, 2005), social interaction (Collins & Berge, 1996), and social networks (Cho, Lee, Stefanone, & Gay, 2005). These topics were found throughout the literature amongst the seemingly endless list of learning community categories including: distributed communities of practice,

virtual communities, knowledge-building communities, and community of inquiry to name a few. As such, one must be selective in focusing on specific areas.

For this study, I chose to further investigate the literature of collaborative learning and social capital, a theory only recently connected to online learning communities, to better understand the experiences of the MES learning community. Although these two constructs stand alone, I felt that individually they were not sufficient for my study. However, because their principles align so closely with online learning communities and together they exemplify constructivist learning theory, I felt that by using them together they would provide a sufficient foundation to inform the study. In fact, the two constructs have similar characteristics, outcomes and beliefs that interconnect and overlap with online learning communities, so much so that one author considers "collaboration in learning environments, the most important shared characteristic in virtual learning communities and distributed communities of practice, to be central to the development of social capital" (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003). I felt that I was not able to align myself with one concept and that in order to enhance my understanding of online learning communities, the interrelationship of the two concepts must be presented. However, some of the other above mentioned areas did inform my study and are briefly mentioned below.

Social interaction

Regarding social interaction, Collins and Berge (1996) mentioned that an environment must be created that both fosters trust among learners and the instructor, and seeks to promote a cooperative and collaborative environment, allowing students to learn

from course materials, the instructor, and each other. Similar to traditional face-to-face college classrooms, research completed on the online environment shows that interaction among students and between the instructor and students was critically important for student satisfaction and retention (King & Doerfert, 1996). Earlier, in 1993, Nunan reported four key values that were central to distance education and communicative competence between participants was mentioned. Although he admitted that this interaction occurred in all forms of education, ultimately what is valued is the quality of communicative processes where factors such as "access to communicative technologies, impact of the technology itself upon the communication process, interactions and dialogue established between teacher and student, availability of both parties to participate, and roles and power relations revealed through interactions all influence judgments about the quality of interactions" (p. 203). Gunawardena (1995) echoed the premise that multiple factors influence interaction; however she played down the role of technology by stating that, "in computer conferences, the social interactions tend to be unusually complex because of the necessity to mediate group activity in a text based environment. Failures tend to occur at the social level far more than they do at the technical level" (p. 148).

Social presence

In examinations of interaction, the concept of "presence" has also received attention. Like many other terms that existed before online education, social presence has lacked a common definition when applied to this "alternative" environment. Palloff and Pratt, 2007 defined it as: "the person we become when we are online and how we express

that person in virtual space" (p. 28). This definition does leave the debate open for what it means to 'become' somebody online. Rourke, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) defined social presence as "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry" (para. 1). Their study explicated social presence, and attempted to assess it in computer conferencing through content analysis of conferencing transcripts.

Because Short, Williams and Christie (1976) popularized the use of the term social presence in telecommunication, theirs is the most commonly used measure of social presence. They use a self-report measure of "the subjective quality of the communications medium" (p. 65) to measure social presence. Their approach uses a set of semantic differential scales that seek to tap into some of the social and emotional capabilities of the medium. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) measure intimacy by blending the kinds of semantic differential scales used by Short et al., but structuring them to focus on the intimacy construct.

Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) argued that "social presence should be measured from a group perspective – participants' reactions to other participants and activities within the group, rather than a classroom's reaction to the teacher's social presence" (p. 11). They found that social presence could 'be cultured' among teleconference participants, a position different from the view that social presence is largely an attribute of the communication medium. Their research thus demonstrated that social presence is both a factor of the medium and of the communicators and their presence in a sequence

of interactions. Additionally, they found that social presence is a good predictor of learner satisfaction.

In an attempt to move beyond Gunawardena and Zittle's study, Tu (2002) created another new social presence instrument that encompassed variables that the above study missed: privacy, recipients, and topics. Tu found that social presence is comprised of three dimensions: social context, online communication and interactivity, and online privacy. As the definition of presence has expanded and evolved, a distinction was made between interaction and presence, emphasizing that they were not identical. Interaction indicated presence but a student could also interact by posting a message on an electronic bulletin board while not necessarily perceiving that she or he was part of a group or a class. (Picciano, 2002). However, Tu and McIssac (2002) found that social presence was necessary to enhance and foster online social interaction.

Some researchers, as noted in the previous paragraph, attempted to quantify a social psychological construct so that this research field could claim to include quantitative empirical data in their studies. Thus, the particular direction that social presence theory was heading was not an appropriate fit with my theoretical framework that was informed by interpretivism and phenomenology. However, I recognized that there are many concepts from the research on social presence and social interaction that did inform studies which are comparable to mine.

Communities

The term community inevitably expanded with the growth of the internet and distance education. "Community" as a term by itself in the Oxford English Dictionary resulted in 11 definitions. In the one result and perhaps most common and historical use, community was defined as "a body of people organized into a political, municipal, or social unity: a body of men living in the same locality." ("Community," 2008). However, another definition in the list exemplified how community as it was previously known expanded philosophically by subsequently excluding the focus on geographical location. With the advent of the internet and World Wide Web we no longer limit to a community that only exists in the geographically area of which we are situated. With our sense of community evolving with modern society to be more relationship-based, we must remain flexible to new dimensions of community. As such, the definition of community also included, "the general body to which all alike belong" (Community).

What are Learning Communities?

Learning communities as a definition are a highly contested notion. Similar to other notions of community such as "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), "virtual communities," and "community of enquiry," learning communities have been subject to multiple definitions (see for examples Brown, 1994; Cross, 1998; Kilpatrick, 2003, Mitchell & Sackney, 2001) and understandings. Of the many definitions that I came across, the one presented by Vision of learners in the 21st century (1998) offered a clear and concise definition that contained points most often agreed upon by others. Learning communities were defined as "a group of students and at least one educator

who, for a while and motivated by common vision and will, are engaged in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge, abilities and attitudes" ("Vision of learners", para. 2). Regardless of the less agreed upon components, learning communities was a concept that was forging ahead and maintaining a life of its own. Cross (1998) maintained that there was so much interest in learning communities that a categorization would be beneficial. Her three categories included: "*philosophical* (because learning communities fit into a changing philosophy of knowledge), *research based* (because learning communities fit with what research tells us about learning), and *pragmatic* (because learning communities work)" (p. 4).

Characteristics of Learning Communities

Learning communities have been structured using various models (Freeman, Field, & Dyrenfurth, 2001) however, regardless of the model investigated, there are common themes that link the definitions and uses such as the following; "common or shared purpose, interests or geography; collaboration, partnership and learning; respecting diversity and enhanced potential and outcomes" (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003, p. 4). Mitchell and Sackney (2000) listed: shared vision, common understandings, a common goal; close contact and communication; a task component (risk taking and experimentation); and the affective component (support and care of each other with trust and respect).

For learning communities to grow harmoniously "Vision of learners" (1998) suggested three elements: common will, common vision and time. Although the first two are explored by the authors mentioned above, the suggestion of time as an element to be

considered is an important factor, especially when applying learning community concepts to structured programs.

> Its members need to get to know each other, elaborate and assimilate while adapting them to a vision of a community and of the learning process, to be in a position to outline in the light of an on-going experimentation, the concrete implications of that vision, to acquire the habit of working together and, among other things, to arrive at some kind of consensus on the working approaches and rules of the game. (para. 11)

What distinguished a learning community from another group of persons equally assembled for the sake of learning, were the values surrounding its activities and, more concretely, the attitudes and behaviors assumed by its members in their interactions. The building of a learning community could basically be said to require the presence of three main dispositions or attitudes: attention, dialogue, and mutual aid ("Vision of learners," 1998). However, those three attitudes are complementary and can be encompassed by the use of the word "care" (Noddings in "Vision of learners"). To gain perspective, each attitude is described in some detail.

Attention: The most significant characteristic for a group of persons is that they show attention or consideration for each other. "The care that each one of its members mutually shows for each other is made visible, as in any community, through an intellectual or emotional empathy, through special attention and at times, through a kind of solicitude" (para. 6).

Dialogue: The dialogue by many persons establishes a communal learning process where members learn from the others and some, through others. "As soon as a working group or community goes from the stage of a simple exchange of views to that of a dialogue involving discussions about those views, it is at that moment, that a learning community gradually becomes recognized as such. To be present to oneself, to others and to the world was of primary importance" (para. 12).

Mutual aid: "Mutual aid is a more global attitude. It binds learning in a context of solidarity and responsibility and makes each person as a whole, present to each other person. Therefore, it gives the attention and the dialogue, from the inside and not as an addition, the force of their individual and social content" (para. 19). In essence, it was the notion of collaboration where provision of one's own time and the sharing of a part of our self was the matter of true mutual aid (Bosworth in "Vision of learners").

Online Learning Communities

Although most of the same characteristics, elements, and models discussed above relate to online learning communities, the literature in this paper was extended to include an exclusive look at the online context. The potential of learning communities to go beyond a specific geographic locale opened the door to embrace diversity, otherness, and the global perspective. Berg (1999) described online learning communities as a "group of learners, which is networked with other learners, 'knowledge media', and a facilitator, all

working towards the common purpose of acquiring knowledge through interdependent pursuits" (p. 25).

Without the "brick and mortar" around to encase a learning community in a certain environment, online learning communities aided in the creation of connections that reduced the isolation of learning in our own environments. The social construction of knowledge necessitated the existence of community in online classrooms (Falvo & Salloway, 2004). As such, the connections stemmed from the communication and process of the learning community.

Studies have shown that building and sustaining online learning communities required conscious effort (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993). Factors that could impact the community and its development included: course design (Schweir, 2001); instructor's presence (Shin, 2003); collaboratively negotiated norms (Palloff & Pratt, 2007); support (Shea, Li, Swan & Pickett, 2005); and a sense of social presence (Palloff & Pratt). To develop an ideal e-learning community Tu and Corry (2002) suggested that three dimensions should be consistently maximized: instruction, social interaction, and technology. Harasim (1997) further suggested that in order to facilitate knowledge building within online communities, three educational processes needed to be supported: idea generating (and gathering), idea linking, and idea structuring.

It is the development of a strong *learning community* and not just a social community that is the distinguishing feature of online distance education. The

> desired outcome, then, is the formation of a learning community through which knowledge about the content can be conveyed and the ability to collaboratively make meaning from that content can be achieved. (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p.43)

Value of Online Learning Communities

Palloff and Pratt (2007) reminded distance educators that "attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful" (p. 40). Schweir and Balbar (2002) contended that communities founded on social constructivist pedagogy tended to create conditions conducive to the development of an online learning community. And social constructivist pedagogy was "like a dialogue, that is 'internalized' through participation in social interaction" (Bredo, 2000, p. 133). Learning communities reduced the high attrition rates commonly associated with online distance education due to feelings of isolation. However, sustaining an online learning community largely depended on the extent of students' involvement in it and the sharing of common events (Motteram & Forrester, 2005).

Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, and Lee (2007) had similar findings when they determined that positive relationships existed between a sense of learning community and perceived learning engagement, course satisfaction, and learning outcomes in their study of online Master of Business Administration learners. Their results also found that building learning communities may not be as intuitive as some might suggest. They maintained

that "communities cannot develop on their own without careful planning, continued support, and intentional tasks and activities" (para. 65).

When commitment was high and contributions from all members valued, communities did have the potential to co-create knowledge, make effective decisions, and effect change, according to Mealman and Lawrence (1998). In addition to sharing experiences in a cohort group, members learned through the "baking of ideas." As they developed a comfort level with one another over time, they were more willing to risk throwing out half-baked, not fully formed ideas for consideration. These ideas were discussed, affirmed, built on, challenged, debated, and ultimately "baked" through collaborative effort. The community members shared ownership in the knowledge created.

Cohorts

What are Cohorts?

Although much research has been conducted into the formation, types of, and significance of cohorts at the graduate level, most of the research focused on traditional graduate level programs. The concept of a cohort could be defined rather neatly as consisting "of a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences" (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 401) but additional characteristics were added to extend the definition. Interestingly these added components are very similar to those that are used to describe learning communities: supportive learning environment, independent and interdependent

learning opportunities, coherence, networking, the building of professional connections, and the development of a sense of group purpose based on common interests (Yerkes et al., 1995). Indeed it was hard for me to distinguish where one concept began and another one ended and I am therefore inclined to believe that an overlap can exist.

In trying to determine a relationship between learning communities and cohorts, I came across what I found to be an easily understood typology of cohort groupings. Yerkes et al. (1995) noted that at least three types of cohort groupings have been practiced: 1) closed or pure cohorts, where students take all of their course work together in a pre-arranged sequence, 2) open or mixed cohorts, in which students enroll in a core set of classes together and take additional course work to meet their own course requirements, and 3) fluid or course-by-course cohorts, in which students could join the cohort at different times. However, the distinctions do not run far as Yerkes et al. mentioned that an effective cohort generally did not develop on its own but rather required careful planning and continuous attention by a skilled facilitator; again a finding consistent within the literature reported on effective learning communities.

Characteristics of Cohorts

Fundamental characteristics of cohorts were: defined membership, common goal/experiences/philosophies, structured meetings over time, and intense facilitated relationships (Saltiel & Russo, 2001). The authors also noted that cohort based programs often feature intensive scheduling, as is the case with the MES program since it is intended to be completed in two years while working full-time. Cohorts were often

characterized with the notion of cooperative and/or collaborative learning. Although cohorts often made use of both types of learning experiences, it should be clear that the cohort structure provided the program framework. The primary purpose of collaborative learning was to "get students to work with faculty to create knowledge together" (Landa & Tarule in Salteil & Russo, p.3). True cohorts were defined by an impermeable boundary that differentiated its members from other students (Saltiel & Russo).

Value of Cohorts

The term cohort waxed and waned from the 1950s until now (Barnett, Bason, Yerkes & Norris, 2000). With resurgence in the use of the cohort model, researchers commented on why cohorts may work. Student benefits that were documented ranged from high achievement to positive ethical climate (Schulte 2002/2003) to increased retention (Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Schulte 2002/2003). Other benefits included development of group memory, easy administrative structure, friendship and camaraderie, and the instructional advantage of integrative curriculum design across several courses. Another attractive feature of cohort programs was the often diverse student membership; with a mixture of gender, ethnicity, learning styles, professional experience, and aspirations the complementary mix that created a "skill bank" for cohort members (Saltiel & Russo).

Some authors related the effectiveness to group dynamic theories on evidence such as member importance, sense of belonging, and acceptance for their expertise and contributions (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2005). Others related to adult learning

theories whereby adults learn best when they can direct their own learning, influence decision making, focus on problems relevant to practice, tap their rich experiential background, and build strong relationships with peers (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As well, adult educators have noticed three areas in which cohorts and collaborative learning allowed for and challenged growth for adult learners with different ways of knowing in three areas: supporting academic learning; supporting emotional and psychological well being, and providing an opportunity to broaden perspectives on themselves, each other, and their lives (Drago-Severson, 2004).

Collaborative Learning

> *Collaboration is "a personal philosophy, not just a classroom technique. It is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle" (Panitz, 1996, para. 3).*

What is Collaborative Learning?

First and foremost, most literature made it clear that collaborative learning and cooperative learning were two different concepts. Panitz's (1996) highly referenced definitions of collaborative learning and cooperative learning provided an excellent starting point to the discussion. Collaborative learning, or coming together in groups,

> suggests a way of dealing with people which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There was a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the groups' actions. The underlying premise of collaborative learning was based upon consensus building

> through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other group members. (Panitz, para. 3)

The point was made by Panitz and others (see for example, Bonk & Lawson, 2001; Hiltz, 1998; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004) that collaborative learning was more student-centered than cooperative learning.

In contrast, "cooperative learning was defined by a set of processes which helped people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific. It was more directive than a collaborative system of governance and closely controlled by the teacher" (Panitz, 1996, para. 4). Although one of the main points that distinguished the two concepts was the role of the teacher, Kukulska-Hulme (2004) did insist that there is a need for an instructor in online collaborative learning environments, whose role was to be a facilitator who "helps learners develop dynamic communities" (p. 277). She emphasized that they must have a heightened awareness of the structure of tasks, mechanisms of collaboration and sensitivity to online group composition and dynamics, so that all participants were able to: contribute, remove obstacles to collaboration, intervene when conflict arises or vocal students dominate, modify planned tasks, and structure the learning environment.

Collaborative learning has its roots in sociocultural theory, constructivist theory, distributed cognition theory, and situated cognition theory (Roberts, 2005). Each of these theories of cognition and learning stressed the importance of interaction or interactivity, a concept that Tu (2004) noted is a fundamental construct foundational to collaborative online learning (along with social context and technologies that support and enhance

knowledge development). Bonk and Lawson, (2001) agreed that an "important component of collaboration is the discussion that occurs during task engagement" (p. 22).

Johnson and Johnson (1996) noted in a study on collaborative groups that reciprocal dependencies exist where individuals in a group each depend upon others within that group. The outcomes of such an arrangement included: greater individual achievements, greater effort to achieve, greater social support, and greater reported self-esteem. Interestingly, they noted that these variables increased for collaborative approaches over individual or competitive settings at an even higher level when the task was more complex and involved greater problem-solving and creativity. They also listed the following major types of behaviours in collaborative learning situations: giving and receiving help and assistance; exchanging resources and information; explaining elaborating information; sharing existing knowledge with others; giving and receiving feedback; challenging others' contributions; advocating increased effort and perseverance among peers; engaging in small group skills; and monitoring each others' efforts and contributions.

Benefits of Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning had many key benefits that Roberts (2005) reported by abbreviating and amending Panitz's (1996) previous exhaustive list. Collaborative learning promoted critical thinking skills, involved students actively in the learning process, improved classroom results, and modeled appropriate student problem-solving techniques, developed a social support system for students, built diversity understanding

among students and staff, established a positive atmosphere for modeling and practicing cooperation, could increase students' self esteem, and developed positive attitudes towards teachers (Roberts). Hiltz (1998) also mentioned benefits of collaborative learning that were similar to the above but also included the enhancement of student satisfaction with the learning and experience. Student satisfaction was a strong indicator of graduate student success: "It is assumed that a measure of adult student satisfaction would provide an indication of institutional vitality" (Hendry, 1983, p. 48).

Many sources of advice were coming out of the current research. Important recommendations made by Graham and Misanchuk (2004) included the following suggestion of stages for a successful online collaborative experience: creating the groups, structuring the learning activities, and facilitating group interactions. Tu's (2004) book outlined 21 designs to building an online collaborative learning community; and Jacque and Salmon's (2007) chapter on developing group learning were examples of how-to literature aimed at assisting instructors.

Hiltz's (1998) popular compilation of research indicated that collaborative learning was necessary for online learning communities to provide emotional support, sociability, and information and instrumental aid. Although her recommendations and future research was from an analysis of three studies, her observations were referenced frequently in online collaborative learning articles. Hiltz recommended that a structure of interaction must occur through the instructor's modeling and encouragement, but the students must be the main players with full and willing participation. Of importance was

her strong recommendation that collaborative learning must employ small group numbers, however she does not suggest a specific number. And although she concluded that online collaborative learning did not lead to the same feeling of community that face-to-face encounters did, she encouraged the subsequent research around building and sustaining online learning communities. It was evident through the research summarized above that her advice had been taken seriously.

Drawbacks of Collaborative Learning

Much of the early literature on collaborative learning spoke specifically to the face-to-face environment, but there has been an addition and wealth of information from studies focusing on computer-supported collaborative learning. Roberts (2005) noted some of the major books, journal articles, conferences, and research groups that focused on online collaborative learning and he made the point that it is a burgeoning field of research. Although proponents of collaborative learning are many, they did not ignore the reality that problems exist. Roberts touched on some of the problems that teams might encounter such as: students' not doing their fair share, one member is left to do all the work, cliques form within the group, and, subtasks are divided without collaboration. And specifically for online environments problems such as flaming (sending deliberately inflammatory email) and spamming (sending unwanted bulk email) can occur. Luckily, most of these problems do have effective solutions such as: collecting regular reports from team members, reassigning groups, awarding reduced marks, and establishing netiquette (online etiquette) expectations.

Collaborative Learning and Participation

Collaborative learning could be defined as a learning situation "in which two or more subjects build synchronously and interactively a joint solution to some problem" (Dillenbourg & Schneider in Bonk & Lawson, 2001, p. 22). The exact definition was too problem-based to be directly applied to the MES program, but I perceive that it was applicable as a general concept where learning occurs in groups that do not have teacher-defined roles and we do employ discussions of rich descriptions of realistic cases that were known to encourage collaboration (Bennett, 2004) as well as collaborative interactions around research plans (Hiltz, 1998). In bringing together the notions of interaction (as mentioned above) and collaboration, I have noted that participation might be a term that could encompass both concepts. Indeed, participation was so integral to online learning that it was often mandated, as in the case of the MES program, by awarding participation grades.

Social Capital

What is Social Capital?

Social capital was often discussed in relation to a systematic theory of social order and was based on both economics and sociology (Coleman, 1994). Recently, however, social capital had been frequently used as a framework for understanding various social issues in communities and groups within educational arenas. Relevant to the discussion of online learning communities, social capital as a construct had been used to examine areas such as: lifelong learning (Field, 2005), virtual learning communities and distributed communities of practice (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003), adult learning

policy (Golding, 2007), student cohorts in teacher education (Manduzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2005), and training (Kilpatrick, Bell, & Falk, 1998).

Social capital was much like other social constructs or frameworks in that it was not consistently defined, not widely understood, and difficult to measure. However, as Golding (2007) admitted, it was important to recognize and value social capital. In repeating Golding's approach, social capital could become increasingly understood by expanding on some of its widely known concepts including: trust, shared values, collaboration, give and take, and networks. All of these parts make up the central notion of strong interpersonal relationships. In an attempt to categorize the definitions of social capital, Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003) noted that most fit into two categories: 1) a structural dimension that referred to the fundamental elements of the network such as types of ties and connections to the social organization of the community, and 2) a content dimension that included the types of norms, trust, shared understanding, and those variables that hold people together. The authors proceeded to form their own working definition of social capital in virtual learning communities that I will adopt for the purposes of my research. They defined social capital in virtual learning communities as "common social resource that facilitates information exchange, knowledge sharing, and knowledge construction through continuous interaction, built on trust and maintained through shared understanding" (para. 12).

Field (2005) summarized the history of social capital theory by focusing on the three influential figures that are responsible for ideas surrounding much of the

discussions on social capital today. The first key figure in social capital theory, Bourdieau (1986), emphasized the importance of social capital as a source of power, and as a means for people to advance their interests and secure their relative advantage over the longer term. The second key figure in social capital theory, Coleman (1988), represented social capital as a resource because it involved the expectation of reciprocity, and went beyond any given individual to involve wider networks whose relationships were governed by a high degree of trust and shared values. The last influential theorist was Putnam, whose view of social capital mirrored Coleman's in that it stressed the role of social capital in supporting cooperation; "social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam in Field, p. 26). As Field noted, the three influential figures in social capital theory all agreed that the core elements consisted of personal connections and interpersonal interaction together with shared sets of values that were associated with these contacts.

Social capital could be viewed with varying lenses and from differing viewpoints. Unlike many studies that choose to follow Bourdieu's notion of capital as a "positional asset that people can use in order to pursue their own advantage and consolidate their own position relative to others" (Field, 2005, p. 28), I assumed that social capital is a 'good thing' and facilitates communal good. This does not imply that I am naïve to a more differentiated version of social capital, having recognized that it had both positive and negative consequences, but I saw it as applicable for my purpose since I was looking at a "closed" community. However, even with a closed community such as a cohort

group, social capital could have a negative side. Much like the echo chamber effect online where studies suggested that forums, blogs, and other discussion arenas reproduced or "echoed" the same messages back and forth (see for example, Wallsten, 2005), strong norms and mutual identification within social capital could limit its openness to information and to alternative ways of doing things (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). However, this does not overshadow the 'good' outcomes that social capital could produce.

Characteristics of Social Capital

Two main characteristics of social capital that can be found in all of its various forms and that seem to relate directly to cohort models in a learning environment are 1) the social structure allowed relations between people and among persons and therefore it had value in use but cannot be traded easily and 2) social capital made possible the achievement of ends that would be impossible without it by facilitating the actions of people in it. (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

In order to situate social capital, Woolcock (in Mansuzuk, Hasinoff & Seifert, 2005) cautioned that "social capital cannot be understood independently of its broader institutional environment" (para. 11). In a similar context to this study, Mansuzuk, Hasinoff and Seifert emphasized Coleman's four properties of social structures that increased the likelihood that institutions would generate social capital including the following: closure, stability, dependence, and shared ideologies. Closure is when "all group members have access to one another with limited intervention from outsiders"

(para. 15); stability is when groups experience few, if any, changes in membership over time; dependence, also known as interdependence, is when group members can rely on each other to succeed; and ideology is having a shared vision and joint purpose. The authors demonstrated that each property existed in a faculty of education student cohort group.

Woolcock (1998), in his work on social capital in the development process, identified three broad categories of social capital:

> 1) binding social capital, comprised of ties between like people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends, and neighbors; 2) bridging social capital, which is made up of more distant ties with like persons, such as loose friendships and workmates; and 3) linking – or scaling – social capital, which reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside the community, thus enabling members to leverage a far wider range of resources than are available within the community. (p. 13-14)

Structural dimension of social capital. As the central thesis to their work, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) maintained that "social capital facilitates the development of intellectual capital by affecting the conditions necessary for exchange and combination to occur" (p. 250). Through this theory, each dimension mentioned above influenced how social capital created intellectual capital. The structural dimension's facets affected access to parties for exchanging knowledge and participating in knowing activities. These facets, which closely exemplify business organizations more than educational

organizations, included: network ties which are social relations that constitute information channels and network configurations which are the differing effects that relationship structures have on each other. These two concepts translated into an educational context, for example, to the instructor and student relationship or student to student relationship and how a range of information can be accessed due to differing backgrounds of knowledge. This knowledge is then further exchanged and combined.

Cognitive dimension of social capital. The cognitive dimension of social capital shared a strong resemblance in fundamental elements to the basic premise of social constructivism – that knowledge and meaning were always embedded in a social context and that the process of knowledge creation relied on meaningful communication. Research suggested that at least some sharing of context between parties is essential for meaningful exchange (Boisot in Nahapiet and Ghoshal). To further expand on this idea Nahapiet and Ghoshal suggested that sharing comes in two ways: "(1) through the existence of shared language and vocabulary and (2) through the sharing of collective narratives" (p. 253). Both of these elements facilitated the creation of intellectual capital by acting as a medium and a product of social interaction.

Relational dimension of social capital. Although it was apparent that each dimension was important and not mutually exclusive, the relational dimension was expanded on at length. Of significance in the relational dimension was the point that "high levels of social capital usually are developed in contexts characterized by high levels of mutual interdependence" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 257). Four aspects

made the relational dimension: trust, norms, obligations and expectations, and identification. Nahapiet and Ghoshal noted a number of studies that indicated "where relationships are high in trust, people were more willing to engage in social exchange in general, and cooperative interaction in particular" (p. 254). It was also noted that trust indicated a willingness to be vulnerable to another party and that "trust, by keeping our mind open to all evidence, secures communication and dialogue" (Misztal in Nahapiet & Ghoshal, p. 254). Norms represented a degree of consensus in the social system. For example, norms of cooperation could have had a significant influence on the exchange of knowledge and essentially become "expectations that bind" (Kramer & Goldman in Nahapiet & Ghoshal). Obligations indicated a commitment or duty to undertake some activity in the future. Although there could have been formal or professional obligations that existed between people, it was the personal obligations that developed through working together that allowed people to absolutely rely on each other (Fairtlough in Nahapiet & Ghoshal). Identification "is the process whereby individuals see themselves as one with another person or group of people" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, p. 256). Through identification concern for collective processes and outcomes was enhanced, thus increasing the anticipation and motivation to combine and exchange knowledge.

Social Capital's Role in Creating Intellectual Capital

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) discussed the role of social capital in the creation of intellectual capital by identifying three facets: structural, relational, and cognitive. An important point that they reminded readers to consider is that these dimensions were separated for the sake of analysis but in reality, they are highly interrelated. The structural

dimension referred to the overall pattern of connections between actors. Relational dimension was referring to "the particular relations people have, such as respect and friendship, that influence their behavior" (p. 244). It referred to "those assets created and leveraged through relationships" (p. 244). The cognitive dimension referred to "those resources providing shared representations, interpretations, and systems of meaning among parties" (Cicourel in Nahapiet and Ghoshal).

Intellectual capital was defined by Nahapiet and Ghoshal as "the knowledge and knowing capability of a social collectivity, such as an organization, intellectual community, or professional practice" (p. 245). With knowledge building as the central outcome of a graduate course or program, an expansion on the link of social capital to the creation of intellectual capital is necessary. Although my study did not aim to in any way to measure or determine knowledge creation, it was a hopeful outcome of a community of learners and therefore, I included this aspect, since it was pertinent to the literature review.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) believed that knowledge is created through combination and exchange.

> Since intellectual capital generally is created through a process of combining the knowledge and experience of different parties, it, too, is dependent upon exchange between these parties. Sometimes, this exchange involves the transfer of explicit knowledge, either individually or collectively held, as in the exchange of information within the scientific

> community or via the Internet. Often, new knowledge creation occurs through social interaction and coactivity. (p. 249)

Although Nahapiet and Ghoshal's discussion is relating to organizations as an institutional context, every group - including and especially groups of learners – can be thought of as an organization. Nahapiet and Ghoshal maintained that social capital facilitated the development of intellectual capital, they also recognized that "the pattern of influence may be in the other direction" (p. 259) and a feedback relationship could exist. This suggestion of a reciprocal relationship was reminiscent of constructivism, whereby social interaction facilitated knowledge construction which then led to further elaboration and thickening of communication.

Online Cohort Learning Community Studies

With the growth in programs and courses in the online setting, research into learning communities grew substantially in the last number of years. The following studies influenced my research on online learning communities due to their similarity in structure, design, and/or context.

Conrad's (2002a) work asked the question: "what influences members' contributions to, and participation in, online learning activities?" Her constructivist research explored seven adult learners' online experiences in an undergraduate cohort program through an interpretive process with a reflective telling of their stories. Although the exact model of cohort was not fully described, it was clear that it was not closed and

therefore student members of the cohort could come and go depending on the course. As such Conrad found that the community that was created with these students was "functional, time-driven, and carefully modulated; that there were differences in quality between one-time or short-term online existences and ongoing programmatic experiences" (para. 55) and that even one face-to-face opportunity affected the nature of community that formed; although it was not clear how or to what degree was meant by this. Conrad suggested that "participation in online learning activities exists before community, that it contributes to community, that it is the vehicle for maintaining community, and that it eventually becomes the measure of the health of community (para. 60).

As a follow up to her doctoral dissertation on the above question, Conrad (2005) conducted another study with a longer timeline. The participants for this study were graduate students enrolled in an online cohort program that included two three-week sessions with an expected completion around two years. The study "sought not only to determine learners' initial perceptions of community, but also captured their sense of community as it developed throughout their program of study" (p. 5). Her findings emphasized the importance of learner-learner interaction in the development of community as well as reflections on the presence and intimacy of the cohort factor. A number of conclusions were offered for insight into the community: the community evolved over time with a growth in levels of comfort, intimacy, self-reliance, and self-knowledge; community cannot be made or given but grown among its members to be intentional and sustainable; strength of the community was in the bonds among learners,

and instructor value was not agreed upon; face-to-face interactions were a contributing factor to the health of the online community and online learning was not perceived as a substitute for face-to-face encounters. What was not clear in the context of the study was if other students could join the "core" courses and therefore, what type of cohort existed.

Brown (2001) conducted a qualitative study that attempted to develop theory regarding the process of community-building in an adult computer-mediated distance learning class. Three levels of community were identified: making online acquaintances; community conferment (membership was gained through being part of a thoughtful discussion that was of importance to all); and finally camaraderie (after long-term and/or intense association). The researcher noted that five participants reported no sense of community for various reasons. With a focus on the difference between veteran students (self-identified status which appeared to be based on personality, time, interaction and perhaps the intensity of the class – certainly on participation and engagement but not related to specific amounts of time online) and new students Brown identified fifteen steps in the process of community-building: 1) tools (textbooks and software), 2) comfort level, 3) self-assessment (questioning why they seemed to have difficulty while others did not) and judgments (consciously or unconsciously of each other's input, 4) similarities (used to begin virtual conversations), 5) needs met, 6) time allotted, 7) supportive interaction, 8) substantive validation, 9) acquaintances/friends, 10) earning trust, respect. 11) engagement, 12) community conferment, 13) widened circle of acquaintances, 14) long term/personal communication, and 15) camaraderie. Practical advice based on the above processes was given to instructors and curriculum designers.

Lee, Carter-Wells, Glaeser, Ivers, and Street (2006) reported on preliminary results of a three year case study investigating the question, "how was an effective online learning community developed among the first cohort of students in an instructional design and technology master's degree program?" (p. 13). Community-centered approaches to learning was the most essential finding for building community. This was followed closely by the establishment of a constructivist learning environment. Another key finding came through the assessment of relevant learning with positive feedback on progress as a learner. With this finding was also a mention of evaluating online learning programs with clearly articulated criteria. Positive interactions among instructors and fellow students engendered community development as did critical discourse by fostering a knowledge-building community and the use of seamless computer-mediated communication technology.

Duncan's (2004) doctoral dissertation was a mixed methods approach to research guided by the question, "how does community develop in an adult online learning environment, and how is it structured?" (p. 7). Duncan found that connections made among participants "were derived from task-related interactions and driven in varying extents by each type of motivator" either natural will or rational will (p. 342). Factors that impacted the online learning experience were dichotomized into positive and negative. Positive factors included: the relevance of course content, self reflection time, increased technology skills, new ways of learning, opportunities to participate, flexibility, safety, diversity of the group, self expression, a sense of accomplishment, level of trust, and

interactions with each other. Negative factors included: lack of face-to-face contact and therefore reduced opportunity for conversation, absence of body language, lack of immediate clarification of questions, lack of instructor presence, and slow marking of assignments.

Summary

Exploring the research on online learning communities was a daunting task. For a relatively recent concept, the literature is overwhelmingly prevalent. Narrowing the focus was pertinent in order to make it manageable. I also had to discover what areas were relevant for the context of my study within the MES program. I provided a history of online education, defined community and subsequently online learning communities as well as elaborated on specific studies that were of particular importance to support my study. The concepts of collaborative learning and social capital were discussed, since they provided a framework from which to explore online learning communities.

The relationship of collaborative learning, social capital, and online learning communities to constructivist learning was important to note. What stood out for me was the focus on student-centered learning and the relationships among students. The social capital literature highlighted the importance of group dynamics and how well-functioning social contexts can facilitate the growth of intellectual capital or knowledge construction. Collaborative learning seems to have numerous benefits as pointed out by multiple researchers; however, what struck me as instrumental was the notion that positive collaborative learning may lead to higher student satisfaction. This point should be of

importance to programs such as ours, where adult learner success is hard to measure appropriately.

Chapter Three: Methodology

As described in Chapter One, the purpose of this study was to understand participants' experiences in an online graduate program and focus more specifically on the organized and emerging structures of residency teams, cohorts, and face-to-face residencies as they might relate to experiencing an online learning community. The methodology, participants, data collection, and analysis for the study are described in this chapter.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research can generally be thought of as being interpretive, naturalistic, and inductive. The situations studied in a qualitative inquiry are often reflective of everyday life and the role of the researcher is to gain a 'holistic' overview of the context to explicate the ways people come to understand these situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At its core, qualitative inquiry seeks to work from an underlying emphasis on processes and meanings and a belief that some, if not most, reality is socially constructed. Close, interpersonal relationships between people and between people and knowledge are usually necessary to gain access to this meaningful data. And the researcher's role is inextricably linked to the context and process. I was guided by one of Merriam's (1998) assumptions: that qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, and only secondarily with outcomes or products.

Because the purpose of my research study was to understand the experience of participants in an online environment, a qualitative research orientation was the most

suitable choice to gain information and "interpret" the world from the participants' frame of reference. Johnson (1995) recommends that technology educators "engage in research that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features" (p. 4). To understand and interpret the experiences of the participants in an online learning community, I needed to talk with, and listen to, them and move beyond the words I had encountered on the computer screen. This qualitative research study was based on the overall paradigm of interpretivism; where the general focus is on the processes by which meanings are "created, negotiated, sustained, and modified within a specific context of human action" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 225).

Guiding Philosophies

The underlying philosophy of my study was guided by social constructivism; the view that knowledge is socially constructed, relative, and contextual; and, the focus on the collective generation of meaning shaped by conventions of language and other social processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Because constructivism is a commonly adopted paradigm for adult learning in general, early studies of successful online learning experiences contained the same principles (Jonassen, 2000). Communication and interaction are common threads that run though the notion of community and are also key components of constructivist learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), as a result of this history and practice; it was only natural for me that as a function of adult learning the two principles converge.

With my epistemology being constructivist in nature, it was natural for me as an educator as well as a researcher to embrace social learning theory. Although social learning theories took their time to evolve over the years from Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1962), through to the present, there seems to be common understanding by contemporary educational researchers that learning is somehow fundamentally social. Swan and Shea (2005) identified three common themes in social learning theories: (1) cognition is situated in particular social contexts, (2) knowing is distributed across groups, and (3) learning takes place in communities. Along with these themes, there is a belief in "distributed cognition" – that understandings develop through our interactions with other people and cognitive tools; and, therefore knowing "resides in these interactions and not only in the individual" (p. 4). Social learning theory has provided obvious insights about how learning communities are educationally relevant. "Knowledge and learning are a natural part of the life of communities that share values, beliefs, languages, and ways of doing things" (Swan & Shea, p. 4). Because the MES program is designed around learning communities and my philosophy was compatible with this style of learning, it seemed appropriate that my research would align with the social constructivist perspective.

Research Methodology

Because "justification of our choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work" (Crotty, 1998, p. 2) it seemed imperative that I explain my position in some detail. Specifically, I was unable to align myself with one particular theoretical perspective or

orientation. However, I attempted to identify with some notions of phenomenology, but remained uneasy due to its wide use (Patton, 2002) and elusive definition (Ehrich, 2003). Indeed, I had a difficult time grasping the sometimes subtle differences between the phenomenological traditions, such as transcendental, existential, hermeneutic, linguistic, and ethical as described by Adams and Van Manen (in press). Nevertheless, in a general sense, I aimed to understand the structures of lived experience because this online world is one in which I have participated both as a student and within the larger context for my job. As Van Manen (2003) states, phenomenologists want "to know the world in which we live as human beings" (p. 5). I share that hope.

The basic focus that all forms of phenomenology share is "exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Patton encourages a capture and interrogation of the phenomenon by describing how people perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it. Patton suggests that experience and interpretation are intertwined. This aspect resonates with my study: I was interested in the lived experience of an online graduate student in the MES program.

Although I was still grappling with the traditions of phenomenology, I was intrigued with Adams and Van Manen's summary of hermeneutic phenomenology based on Heidegger: "every form of human understanding is interpretive" (p. 2). I am not yet prepared to align myself in totality with this specific tradition; however, my reading suggests that all forms of phenomenology acknowledge the importance of interviewing as

a method of data collection. As such, by following the notions of hermeneutic phenomenology, Adams and Van Manen note these particular interviews are "used to explore interpretive meaning aspects of lived experience material" (p. 7).

The outcome of phenomenology is not to present theory that explains the world, but rather to provide plausible insights that bring us closer to the world so that we might, in our living, understand the world (Van Manen, 1997). Thus, Van Manen maintains that it would be inappropriate to provide a conclusion or summary of a phenomenological study because the conclusion or summation of a study cannot be understood in the writing but only in the living. I do not attempt to provide a theory in my findings; but rather, as suggested, share the insights into the lived world of an online community in the MES program. The summations inherent in my study will be practiced in my ongoing vocation. I was also relieved to read that Patton (2002) admits that a study can still employ a phenomenological perspective legitimately without being a purely phenomenological study. This understanding allows me to employ phenomenology to gain insight without having to understand all of its abundant nuances.

In summary, while I embrace the method of data collection as interviews, data analysis as thematic, and propose interpretations of my findings rather than conclusions, I am aware that these do not encompass a full phenomenological or hermeneutic phenomenological study since aspects of each were left out. For example, I do not use phenomenological reduction or bracketing, "a process of suspending one's judgment or bracketing particular beliefs about the phenomena in order to see it clearly" (Laverty,

2003, p. 6). Nor do I use a linguistic hermeneutic circle, "a process of co-creation between the researcher and participant, in which the very production of meaning occurs through a circle of readings, reflective writing and interpretations" (p. 22). Because aspects such as these, and others, are missing from my study, I will address trustworthiness and limitations later in the chapter.

Research Design

As described earlier, this research was an interpretive study that was guided by phenomenological considerations and was based upon practices and assumptions inherent in a qualitative approach to inquiry. As such I conducted eight one-on-one interviews either face-to-face or via the telephone using semi-structured questions. Participant selection, interviews, and initial data analysis occurred simultaneously. Field notes were documented and I transcribed each interview myself. Transcripts were read for common themes and the relationships between them were examined. I analyzed the data inductively using thematic analysis and provided a description and interpretation of these data to provide insight into the understandings and experiences of MES students interviewed in this study. The following discussion provides enhanced detail of the process.

The Participants

Participants were purposefully selected through typical sampling (Creswell, 2005). I sought members of the MES program in the Leadership and School Improvement strand that had graduated and/or at least completed two face-to-face residencies to gain perspectives from different cohorts. I endeavored to obtain

participants from each gender as well as a range of ages, geographical locations, and current job positions. Participants were also chosen based on their expression of willingness to share and communicate their experiences to me as demonstrated by their previous communicative competency in the program. My sampling was also influenced by my comfort level with the participants and knowledge of their overall background. Sample size was not predetermined but decided by data adequacy. As such, participants were recruited individually through an information letter sent to their email address. Sampling occurred concurrently with interviewing and analysis, and it continued until saturation was achieved. Eight participants were interviewed in total and the interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via the telephone.

Data Collection

Gubrium and Holstein (in Fontana & Frey, 2005) considered the interview "as a contextually-based, mutually accomplished story that is reached through collaboration between the researcher and the respondent" (p. 714). I am aware that I fall into the "interview society" label that has been critiqued by some writers (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Silverman, 2005) as a researcher relying on interviews as the only source of information with the assumption that "interviewing results is a true and accurate picture of the respondents' selves and lives" (Fontana & Frey, p. 698). With an awareness that interviews are interactional encounters "and that the nature of the social dynamic of the interview can shape the nature of the knowledge generated" (p. 699) I hoped that my relationship with these participants aided in the production of accurate accounts and replies.

The data collection method was one-on-one interviews with semi-structured questions. I conducted one pilot interview with a volunteer participant who met the inclusion criteria. The interview was tape-recorded and transcribed before meeting with my supervisor for feedback on improving the interview questions. My supervisor and I agreed to some minor changes and decided to check in again after three were completed. One additional question was included for the subsequent interviews but the pilot interview did not differ significantly from subsequent ones, therefore, all were included in my analysis.

Interview Guide

The questions were developed in consultation with my supervisor as the aim was to maintain some consistency during the interviews, yet still allow the participants enough freedom to focus on what was important to them. The questions were created to initiate conversation in a few different but general topics and the flexibility allowed for participants to take it in any direction they desired. I came to the idea of each question through reflecting on my professional experience with the MES program and the numerous conversations I have had with the students. I also reflected on the in-house evaluations that we request our students to fill out annually, as well as, of course, my research questions. Occasionally, I had to use prompting questions or ask for clarification in the interviews, but mostly I was able to just sit back and listen.

Eight interviews were conducted over a two month period ranging in length from 35 minutes to 90 minutes. All the participants were eager and appeared excited to participate. Each interview had an informal and friendly atmosphere, perhaps due to our prior relationship. Six of the eight interviews were conducted in person, and two were telephone interviews due to geographical constraints. The two telephone interviews gave me a glimpse into communication constraints of not having face-to-face contact, similarly reminiscent of some findings regarding online communication. Of the six participants that I met face-to-face, three interviews were conducted at my workplace – at the request of the participants. One was conducted at the school where a participant taught, and one was conducted at a coffee shop near the participant's town. All locations were mutually agreed upon by the participant and myself.

At the beginning of each interview, the study was explained (although an Introduction Letter was sent to everyone) and Informed Consent was obtained (Appendices A & B respectively). The first five questions pertained to background information so that the study sample could be described in some detail regarding participants' current context. This information was helpful for me, in that I learned a few new details about some of the participants. Finally, the interviews were conducted using the interview guide (Appendix C).

All interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were written after most of the interviews to record contextual data such as the setting and my interpretation and feelings from the interview along with other observations and notes. In an effort to reduce

distraction, no notes were written during the interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by me and the transcription was then emailed to each participant for verification of details with the option of editing and adding if desired. Three participants edited their transcripts while the others simply agreed that the transcripts represented the information as discussed. Edits ranged from fixing grammatical errors to clarifying the way the information was presented.

Data Analysis

The data gathered in this study were analyzed using an inductive approach (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Patton, 2002) common to qualitative inquiry. Patton states that there are no rules in qualitative data analysis – only general guidelines and procedural suggestions; and, because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique. Following Patton's counsel, the approach that informed my process was thematic analysis, "the process for encoding qualitative information" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vi). However, I should be careful to note that my qualitative plan set out to analyze and 'organize the data thematically;' but not to "code" the data in the rigorous and quasi-scientific manner Boyatzis seems to hint at. Instead, I followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) indication that phenomenologists do not code, "but assume that through continued readings of the source material and through vigilance over one's presuppositions, one can reach *'Lebenswelt'*" (p. 8) or the essence of the account. As a result of this more-phenomenological stance, data analysis took place concurrently with data collection so that I became aware when my interviews reached a saturation point – I was not hearing anything substantively new. Through the process of transcribing, I was able to

immediately immerse myself with the data and consider different themes as I conducted each subsequent interview. Fortuitously, commonalities in the data were obvious after only two repeated readings and reflection.

After spending so many hours on the computer typing out the transcripts, reading them, and re-reading them after they were given back to me from the member checks, ironically I was eager to work outside the confines of my computer screen. To work hands-on with the data, I printed out my transcripts. The process allowed me another chance to work through the data as I cut out and organized participant quotes that supported my emerging patterns and themes. Aronson (1994) states that "the next step to a thematic analysis is to identify all data that relate to the already classified patterns. All of the talk that fits under the specific pattern is identified and placed with the corresponding pattern" (para. 6). To structure my data analysis, I taped flip-chart paper to my living room walls and proceeded to tape up each cut out quote after writing the pseudonym of the participant on the back. Again, this process allowed me to refine my themes. Aronson describes this step as combining and cataloguing related patterns into sub-themes. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that this process is an iterative and inductive forming of categories - what they call "clustering." To add a sub-layer to this step, I returned to the computer and used a mind-mapping program (used to create diagrams of relationships between ideas or other pieces of information) and created, modified, rejected, combined, and re-created clusters. These re-created clusters are presented in Chapter Four. Miles and Huberman note that clusters are not always mutually exclusive and may overlap, just as I ended up discovering. I found myself

gaining greater insight by utilizing this process and became thoroughly engaged with the work.

The themes that I present in Chapter Four are clusters of processes that generally represent the participants' experiences of an online learning community. To proceed to Aronson's (1994) next step in thematic analysis, building a valid argument for choosing the themes, one must reconsider the literature. Thus, to present my findings in relation to the literature in Chapter Five, I felt compelled to utilize a tactic suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) - one whose purpose seemed to exist as a final adjudication of the process of data analysis. I subsumed my themes into more general classes; a process whereby you "shuttle back and forth between first-level data and more general categories that evolve and develop through successive iterations until the category is 'saturated'" (p. 256). This final organization allowed me to develop categories as a synthesis of my iterations with the themes so that, to the best of my insight, a clear picture was presented of the similarities of these themes and the themes in the literature.

Research Standards

Trustworthiness is essential in all research to determine the quality of the study. I will attempt to outline this for my study in this section. As Silverman (2005) asked of qualitative researchers; "How are they to convince themselves (and their audience) that their 'findings' are genuinely based on critical investigation of all their data and do not depend on a few well-chosen 'examples'?" (p.211). To answer this question, I have turned to Guba and Lincoln's (1989) commonly referred to set of trustworthiness criteria

for judging adequacy that parallel the rigor criteria of positivist research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Of these criteria, two are appropriate for evaluating my study: credibility and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility can be thought of as matching the realities constructed by the participants with the realities portrayed by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The technique that I employed to enhance trustworthiness is member checking (Creswell, 2008) by sending transcriptions back to the participants to verify our conversations. Participants had the opportunity to edit, and add or delete information for accuracy. I chose not to e-mail the themes back to the participants for verification simply due to time constraints. I felt it was important to do at least one member check and I thought it more important that I had the original data represented correctly. As well, through placing myself as an integral constructor of the social reality being studied, I am hoping that this reflexivity (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007) helps engender credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is relative and each situation is unique, therefore, it is up to the reader to determine how relevant the findings are to their situation. For this reason, it is important to provide thick description of time, place, context, and culture. Hansmann (2006) noted that "thick description of Web-based teaching and learning can aid in establishing credibility of results" (p. 105). Because of this, I attempted to use thick description throughout my writing.

Ethical Considerations

I received ethical approval on January 14th, 2008 for this research from the Research Ethics Board member in the Department of Educational Policy Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta (Appendix D).

Informed Consent

Each participant was emailed an information letter prior to agreeing to participate in the study. The letter outlined the study's purpose, procedure, time commitment, data usage, confidentiality and anonymity guarantee, and opting out provisions. Individuals were not coerced or pressured in any way to participate in the study and they could simply choose not to respond to my email. I purposively chose students who had either graduated from the MES program or were in their second year of the program, so as to reduce any perceived power that I might have over their program. My role with second year students was to offer program advice and assistance but I had no direct role with their courses and therefore no influence over assessment, grades, or anything that affects degree completion. There were no incentives to participate, other than engaging in an interesting conversation. Prior to each interview, information regarding their rights as participants were reviewed and a consent form was signed. In the case of the two telephone interviews, copies of the consent form were faxed back and forth. Participants were given four weeks to contact me after the interview if they changed their minds and wanted to opt out.

Confidentiality and Security of Data

Participants were guaranteed that their identity and information would remain confidential. Only my thesis supervisor and I discussed participants and the contents of the interviews. All materials were kept in a secure drawer in my office when not being used. Informed consent forms were stored separately in my home office. Audio tapes, audio files, and transcripts are stored on my password-protected and secured Faculty of Education server space. These will be kept for seven years as will the consent forms after which time I will destroy the data.

Anonymity

Each participant will remain anonymous. As mentioned above, only my thesis supervisor knew the identity of the participants. Each participant had the choice at the beginning of the interview to select a pseudonym and if they did not choose, I gave them one. In writing the results and context, care was taken to conceal identities where necessary. Although it will be obvious to the audience that participants are from the MES program, it was determined that since there are so many students and no identifying features were included, anonymity could be almost certain. No risks were present and the benefits of the study outweighed any risk of unintended violations of privacy.

Assumptions/Biases

My assumptions about qualitative research include the belief that "personal views can never be kept separate from interpretations" (Creswell, 2005, p. 251). An assumption of mine about the interview method in particular parallels Silverman's (2000) note about

how the realist approach gives the researcher direct access to experience; "interview responses index some external reality ('feelings' or 'meanings')" (p. 823). I believe that there is a need for online education, especially for working adult students, and that learning communities are inherently essential for knowledge construction and student satisfaction.

Delimitations

This study focused on members of one online learning community environment in an adult educational setting, the MES program. The qualitative research was conducted within one particular graduate student learning setting in one discipline, in one university in the province of Alberta and as such included variables unique to this campus, program, and to each individual participant. It was delimited to the analysis and report of data collected by semi-structured interviews with eight participants. The data were collected during the months of February, 2008 to March, 2008. I am also keenly aware that my use of only interviews may limit the perception of my credibility. Due to time constraints I was not able to employ triangulation of data collection in this study, such as participant observation, an important method that Patton (2002) suggests to conduct along with in-depth interviewing for interpretive research.

Limitations

Because I was guided by some of the notions of phenomenology, such as the interview-based method of data collection and thematic data analysis, and propose interpretations of my findings rather than conclusions, I am aware there were limitations.

The findings I generated are relevant from my perspective but I make no attempt to claim an ability to generalize to a specific population. As well, the findings did not report any negative experiences (save for the frustration of not having met some of the instructors face-to-face) and as such, might not include a range of experiences that may occur.

I am an active employee of the MES program and have formed a working relationship with many of the students through the course of their programs, as such there exists the possibility that participants did not share their perceptions in full. However, this relationship may have had an advantage in that the students felt that they were talking to a trusted individual; therefore, they could openly express their feelings, concerns, and beliefs. As well, my role in the program may have influenced the data analysis process. Participants in the study were multi-taskers: working full-time, with families, and other life commitments. I am able to indentify with this lifestyle since I am in the same position; therefore, I am aware that and this could have influenced their focus during the interview.

Summary

The methodology, participants, data collection, and analysis for the study were described in this chapter. As well, I provided detail on research standards, my assumptions and the limitations and delimitations of the study. The next chapter will introduce the MES students in general, followed by the specific participants, as well as the findings.

Chapter Four: Findings –Participants and Themes

Who are the MES Students?

The MES program has a diverse set of students in the Leadership and School Improvement strand. As this was the strand that my participants came from, I will endeavor to create a picture of these students. Professionally, most of our students are teachers, school administrators, teacher-leaders, or perhaps those looking to advance positions in the future. We also have curriculum developers, consultants, and people in central office roles. Occasionally we have students whose professional role takes them outside the "regular" school district occupations but they are usually still connected to school environments. Of course we have students who, at the time of taking the program, might be away from the profession due to family responsibilities but one of the admission requirements is a minimum of two years teaching experience.

Students have varied years of experience, with some being educators their whole careers and some coming into the profession later as a change in careers. They come from Kindergarten to Grade 12 settings that include both large and small school sizes – from one room school houses to the largest schools in their province. Geographically, we are seeing students come from places that are further and further away from Edmonton. Initially, most of the students came from Alberta and actually many were considered local to the Edmonton or surrounding area, many having completed their undergraduate degree at the University of Alberta. However, every subsequent year saw the spread grow across more and more provinces and surprisingly, and quickly, even outside of the

country. Most of the students coming from outside the country are teaching at International schools but are originally Canadians.

The personal characteristics of the students are varied. The group of students is of mixed gender with many of the cohorts having slightly higher numbers of females to males. However, most of the males are in administrative positions or explicitly intend to be in administration, while the females have more diverse professional roles. The age has ranged from 24 to 59 with the average falling into the 30's. Because of this age grouping, most of our students have children that are residing at home. This means added layers of responsibility with many of them looking after children, as well as elderly parents. As well, most of the students are married. The MES student population is mainly Caucasian.

Some of the students come into the MES program with one or both of their options completed but many choose to do them either at the same time as the core courses or after their core coursework is complete. We require them to fill out a Technology Compliance Form upon applying to the MES program to indicate that they have the minimum level of technology available to complete the program, as well as minimum proficiency with technology. As one might guess, the students come into the program with varying comfort levels and experience with technology. We provide many technology supports through our program, starting when they are on-campus, face-to-face. This increases their confidence level so that when they are online for the first time, they know what to expect.

Participants

Bob (pseudonyms are used throughout) resides in a large urban location. He is currently and has been an elementary school principal in urban locations for eight years but an educator for around 20 years. Bob chose the MES program because he liked the idea of a cohort structure: "I didn't want to sort of drift through a master's program taking courses here and there, never seeing anybody the same." He was a "very comfortable user" of technology, claiming that "they don't scare me"! To elaborate, he noted that "if I want to try something I try and if it doesn't work I remember what I've done and I can go back and undo it or you turn the computer off and you restart it so it resets." Bob had not taken a graduate level course prior to the MES program but had thought of taking a spring session course, however, was admittedly scared.

"Yeah, I was afraid to jump in with maybe a whole bunch of people that had already taken courses and all that - the idea of starting with the program - and I talked to some people who were in the cohort the year ahead of me and they talked about how the summer sort of really put them at ease and made them feel comfortable."

Casey was living in a rural setting. She is a vice-principal in an elementary school that has kindergarten to grade six and has been an educator for many years. Casey chose the MES program for a variety of reasons. First of all, she was so upset with how many of her colleagues were going out-of-province, and even out-of-country to get their masters degree. She never saw that as a viable option for herself. Second, driving to a location to take courses was not really a suitable option for her. Third, she could still teach and so it really fit into her lifestyle. And finally, she was a University of Alberta graduate so it was important to her to continue her education there if possible. She did admit that she wasn't

sure she was going to like the online part, because "I'm very much about relationships with people. But I did!"

In terms of technology, Casey had been using computers for years for word processing and was comfortable with that; however, the internet presented tools that she had never used before because their dial-up connection was slow. She described herself as "insecure" when she started but comforted by the fact that she had the support of a technologically-strong husband. Now she is totally "comfortable" with technology and felt that her comfort level changed in the first year. She discovered that she was a "just-give-it-a-try kind of gal" and realized that this attitude took her a long way with the technology. Casey had never done an online course before the MES program, although she had completed two option courses ahead of time. These were courses delivered through her school division so they did not require her to be on campus in the traditional face-to-face delivery model.

Dawson was living in an urban setting. He is a vice principal at a middle school, grades five to nine. He has been in this position for four years but an educator for 14 years. Dawson chose the MES program for the simple reason that it fit with his lifestyle as a full-time educator. He was "pretty comfortable" with technology. Like Bob and Casey, he was not stressed by the technology. "I know I'm okay. Like if this isn't going to work, let's try this or let's click this button." However, he did admit that the learning curve would be "a little steep off the start" if students have not used a computer very much. And he pointed out that it could be stressful for some of those people. Dawson had

not taken any previous graduate level courses but he did end up completing his options in a face-to-face, traditional graduate setting.

Denise was living in an urban setting and was a full-time classroom teacher in a division one (kindergarten to grade three) elementary class in an urban setting. She has taught for around 20 years. Again, like Casey, Denise chose the MES programs for a number of reasons. 1) she was juggling a young family and working full-time so getting to campus at specific times would not work well for her, 2) she was confident that she could complete the online portion without difficulties because she had taken correspondence courses before and knew the requirements around this structure, 3) the program was flexible in many ways and she knew she could make it fit into her life, and 4) she did not want to add travel time to her already full schedule.

Denise was "really comfortable" with computers but had never taken a formal computing course. All her computer knowledge had come through "trial-and-error at home and at school." Like the others, she was not afraid of computers or the online-based program. Perhaps this was because she admitted that she knew "where to go to find the answers" and she had the support of other people as well. She was familiar with word-processing but recognized that there would be some aspects of this online style of learning that she would have to work through. Denise had not taken any graduate level courses before entering the MES program.

Irene was living in an urban setting but working in a rural location. She was a division one elementary school teacher and was in her 30th year of teaching. Again, Irene chose the MES program for a variety of reasons. She felt "disenchanted" with what she was doing and "had to extend myself somehow." She heard of the program through a colleague and was not aware that anything was available that allowed her to work at the same time. As a flexible, accommodating program, Irene was able to work at the same time as take the courses; "I'm really passionate about the teaching and my students and so it gave me the chance to learn and still work with my students."

Irene was not a novice with technology, "because I was comfortable enough to teach computer lessons to my students." But she admitted that she was not proficient either. She knew "how to do things" but confessed that in a lot of ways, things were done for her too. She spoke of having to learn a new way of etiquette online – netiquette. Irene was the only participant to have taken two online courses prior to the MES program. This gave her a unique perspective on online learning communities, having experienced courses online where she did not know anyone.

Steve was an out-of-province participant. He resides in an urban setting and is an assistant principal of an elementary school. He has been an educator for over a decade. Steve chose the MES program specifically because the MES director came to his school to recruit. Steve divulged that he was "quite relational" so the face-to-face contact made a big impression on him. It essentially brought the program closer to him, figuratively, and it also helped that it fit into his schedule.

Steve was very comfortable with technology and did complete a research project incorporating technology. He had taken some courses before entering the MES program and these were done at another university in a face-to-face environment.

Tina was a principal of an elementary school in a large urban setting. She has been an educator for 28 years. Tina chose the MES program because she always wanted to do a masters program but never wanted to take time away from work because she loved it and wasn't sure financially if she could afford the time off. She liked the idea of the intensive summer residencies for three weeks, and she wanted to work with the same group of people for the whole time because she realized after an isolating undergraduate experience, that she loved "learning in community." She brought a friend to meet some MES staff before committing and "got a sense of what it was all about and everything about it was so friendly." The experience was positive and welcoming so she made her decision. Finally, she admitted, almost as an aside, that she also received tuition support.

Tina wisely pointed out that her answer to her comfort level with technology would depend on the definition of technology. "If it's about how comfortable was I on a computer and navigating my way through? I could do internet and I could Google some things." She went on to declare that she was not very comfortable! She only did what she needed to do and "didn't really venture very far." However, now she is much more adept and loved the online courses.

She did not have any graduate level experience before entering the MES program.

Joyce was working and living in a rural setting. She was a brand new principal of a charter school but had been in a government position when she began the program. She was in her seventh year of being an educator. As usual, there was more than one reason for Joyce deciding to take the MES program. She was an alumnus of the University of Alberta and felt there to be a quality associated with it. As well, she had personal contacts with prominent faculty members who shared information and promoted the program. She was not previously aware that the program existed. And finally she did her homework and was satisfied that it would suit her. Joycé asked if she could scale her technology comfort level from one to five, with five being the most comfortable and admitting she was probably three or four. And like most others, she did not have any graduate experience before taking the MES program.

Themes: Relationships Overall

To answer my overall research question, "how do online graduate students experience cohort-based learning communities while being a member of a Residency Team?" the interview questions provided some guidance for discussion; however, they were purposely open-ended so that participants were free to respond and tell stories and talk about what was important to them. Remarkably, although open-ended questions were used, I found the responses exceedingly similar. To combine and catalogue related patterns into sub-themes, I chose to follow Miles and Huberman (1994) inductive suggestion of forming categories - what they call "clustering." Again, it must be noted

that clusters are not always mutually exclusive and may overlap, just as I ended up discovering.

After clustering my data at the level of processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the patterns resulted in my iterative categorizations. Ultimately I was left with an overarching theme of relationships, into which the following themes emerged: rapport, sharing, support, trust, hesitation, and time. Each theme is explained and developed with a heavy reliance on participant's voices. I was overwhelmingly impressed and excited to read and re-read the transcripts to support my findings due to the eloquent and often closely correlating responses that each participant provided. As such, I found it easy and important to include as many direct quotes as possible to emphasize these findings.

The overall theme that emerged from my data was the importance of and impact from the relationships that were built among residency team members as well as with instructional and administration staff. Each theme– rapport, trust, sharing, support, hesitation, and time – that emerged is strong and can stand alone but I felt it was important and substantial to point out that each of them linked back to relationships and was ultimately formed because of relationships. Within most themes are sub-themes that again link back to relationships. Rapport included: smaller is better, remembering, (not) knowing instructors, and (not) knowing fellow students. Sharing included resources, ideas, and feedback. Trust was through safety, and trusting to challenge. Support was from instructional staff and residency team members.

To borrow a term that a few of the participants used, what occurred online was "fluid" between residency team members and instructors. "It's a relationship, is what it is" (said one participant). A few of the participants expressed that they chose the program because of its cohort model and the potential relationships they expected to develop. Bob expressed that he's "the sort of person that needs some connection with the other people that I'm doing things with." Tina had a similar reason for choosing the MES program, "working with the same group of people - that was the other thing that was a real plus for me. I didn't want to go and sit in lecture halls again as I did as an undergrad and I have no connection with those people." Their expectations came to fruition during the first summer and continued and flourished for the two year program.

Words such as "connected," "vested interest," "empathetic," "committed," and "kinship" were interspersed throughout the conversations. Participants expressed strong positive feelings toward fellow colleagues, particularly within their residency teams. They also expressed positive feelings toward instructional and administrative staff in the program, often citing that "we" could read into their posting and know just how to respond depending on the situation for the particular person. Participants claimed that relationships were built in the face-to-face residencies and then when they moved online, "the relationships continued to grow within that system." Relationships were like the undercurrent that seemed to carry each person through the program in a successful, constructive journey.

Rapport

Throughout most of the discussions around residency teams, a central theme that emerged was a sense of "knowing" the members. This familiarity was noted in some form or another by all of the participants. It was clear that the sense of rapport was built from the face-to-face residencies, as noted directly by Steve; "that first three weeks is such an imperative part of the masters program" and Bob; "I think those in-person experiences…were an essential component of it."

Going into their first online course was "easy" according to many participants. Denise thought it was "because we knew each other from the summer residency." Joyce mentioned that it was the best experience "because of the cohesion that was created in the residency." Irene expressed a similar feeling about their first online course; "It was great simply because having the face-to-face experience sort of gave me the prior knowledge – the prior knowledge about the members and about the instructors – so it gave me more confidence as to how I should relate to the members and the teaching staff." Denise surmised the same feelings; "It's funny, you know, because you talk about people and knowing people and that face-to-face is important because you're wondering what's going on and I mean I went in and read some of the other group's postings sometimes and thought, 'holy doodle, oooh, that was harsh' but I wasn't part of that team."

Smaller is better. The smaller size and structure of the residency teams was clearly more desirable than the larger cohort for developing rapport, according to most participants. 'Impossible' was a word used to describe their hypothetical impression of

getting to know or of interacting with more students than just their residency team. Dawson felt very passionate that the small size of the residency team structure was integral to the experience;

> Like I mean, how can you know 30 people? It's not possible. It would be impossible to have the type of dialogue, the personal dialogue that you had without having the residency teams. The cohort was just too big to be able to know everyone and I think you really got to know the personalities of people and I think it would be impossible if you were in your whole cohort in one group.

Bob had the same opinion;

> I don't know if you can get to know 24, 30, or 50, or 60. If they weren't in my group, I wouldn't have got to know them. The other ones are just people that come along and are part of the program but really I don't know them and I don't feel any connection whatsoever to them.

Casey appreciated the small residency structure, "because if the circle is too big, I would feel like I can't make the connection." Tina said of her cohort, "the 60 was cool because we did get a lot of time to do stuff together but we never really built strong relationships in that." Irene explained the difference between the cohort and the residency teams; "the cohort would be more general and the team became more specific, more personal." Steve had similar sentiments about his cohort; "There's some in the other residency teams that I really don't know that well and there is only 30 of us to begin with. I'd rather know a few people deeper than a lot of people shallow."

Remembering. The sense of knowing residency team members was an overwhelmingly significant factor in how they interacted online. There was a strong occurrence of most participants remembering the relationships and the visual images that were created from the face-to-face experiences. Visualization was common and this reflection created a sense of security and context. Tina remembered "it being very comfortable" online. "Just the connection with the people, it was good. You knew who you were talking to. It's like picking up the phone and talking to an old friend as opposed to a stranger trying to discuss something that you don't know." Joyce said, "It was very comfortable and you had built a rapport so you knew, you could picture people when they were responding and you were able to put a little more into it rather than blind words written on a blank page." Irene agreed; "it's the familiarity that helped with the online socialization. It made it more predictable."

Casey recalled how,

> I still had a like a picture or a sense of everybody so that when I was reading and sending an email or a posting or whatever, I would know who that was. So it wasn't as if I was just taking flat data from someone I didn't know. I could try and put what they were writing, what they were saying into perspective because I knew where they were coming from or what they were thinking.

Bob recollected,

> When a residency team member would post something you could hear their voice in it…you could picture them, you could hear them speaking when they were

responding to yours. You knew they were responding to me, not just somebody else or some name. They might comment on something from the summer or something they knew I was working on or something they new that I had done so that was more personal.

Dawson felt, "it was very easy – I had no problem at all being able to put names to faces and it was just like having a conversation." In Casey's recollection of the online dialogue, she maintained that, "I felt like I knew where there those folks were coming from." Denise said; "you know the people and you read the messages the way you know they were meant [to be read]."

Bob thought the content was independent to the experience; "It could have been any course, but it was knowing the people so that you read an article and then they respond to it and say, you can hear their voice in it and then they respond to yours and then you can…It's that you know the people. You know who you're responding to. You have a sense of how you can respond to them." Dawson mentioned something similar, "You get the idea of being online and that being boring and sitting there typing, well you know it wasn't that way. There was a sense of humour…And I think it really gave people a chance to be human. And people knew each other's personalities and so the relationships continue to grow within that system."

Some participants expressed that they shied away from other teams even though they were allowed to interact with anyone; "Definitely I just stayed with my residency

team online. Very rarely did I ever respond to anyone else from another res group" said Steve. Bob "never went in and read the other residency team's stuff" because "really, I don't know who they are."

(Not) knowing instructors. The rapport that was built from the summer residencies was not a surprise to me. Having experienced the same thing myself, I knew I was more comfortable engaging in an online dialogue after having met these students. I had the experience to compare it to option courses – non-core courses that are open to any graduate level student – that we offer. Dialoguing with students I've never met has always felt less comfortable and takes more effort to engage with them than with students I've met face-to-face. What did come as a surprise to me was the emphasis that these participants put on rapport with instructors they had met versus instructors they had not met in person. Some instructors in the MES program teach in the summer residencies as well as the online courses in the fall and/or winter terms and some teach only online courses. Of the instructors they met, Casey summarized it for all, "that attachment was so strong."

Without directly asking them, many of the participants mentioned an experience of working with an instructor or teaching assistant that they had never met. Just the act of bringing this up alerted me to the lasting impression of this occurrence and intrigued me. There was an obvious sense of discomfort and lack of ease with this "unknowing" – not having met face-to-face – their instructional staff. Having worked directly with these instructors and in the courses, I know that it is not for a lack of trying to develop a

rapport, but it seemed merely to be a case of not being able to reflect on an experience of meeting face-to-face and visualizing as they could with the instructors who worked with them in the summers' residencies.

> Many spoke very strongly and candidly about this experience;
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> We felt like we really got strongly connected in that first summer and then it felt like all those people had been pulled out and new ones had come in but they didn't have the context. They didn't have our history and we felt kinda cheated that we didn't get those same people and the continuity wasn't there.

Casey recalled how a new instructor joined one of the courses; "and I thought, 'well who is this person and what's she all about'." Joyce said something very similar to Casey; "I've had responses online from someone I've never met and I still haven't met her. And I don't know where she's coming from; I don't know what her life experiences are; I don't know what her responses mean." Bob told a story of a fellow residency team member who wasn't comfortable contacting an instructor that she hadn't met. The action of turning to each other over contacting an "unknown" instructor was common. In an interesting twist, one participant commented on how that experience must have been for a teaching assistant; "I think if she had been with us right from the beginning, it would have made a big difference. But because she joined us part way through, it sort of...I think it was more difficult for her to build that rapport."

(Not) knowing fellow students. Some participants also talked about interactions with students they did not know. Most often this was in reference to an option course that was taken or in one case when a participant was grouped with non-residency team members for a peer-editing assignment (not a common occurrence). Steve simply stated, "It's not as good. You have no tone…if they're serious, if they joke, they have this slant, they believe this, they're conservative, they're liberal or whatever." Bob experienced a similar thing in an option course; "I wasn't sure if some of the people – are they just grandstanding? Some of it was I'd write things and think well no, I can't write it that way because they don't know me and they might take it the wrong way. They don't know where I'm coming from, my sense of humour…and they wouldn't know how to respond to it." Casey spoke of the cohort as a whole, "I still feel a bit separated from them in that some of the folks I have never worked with at all." Joyce shared feelings about someone else's experience of not knowing people online; "I have a sister-in-law who is doing her masters in another city and she hasn't had the cohort experience that we had and so just going in blind and posting and reading peoples' responses, you don't know where it's coming from or why they might be sensitive to that topic or that issue. So for that I'm grateful that we didn't go in blind because I think that would have been far more difficult than what we established."

Sharing

Another theme that arose from the data was sharing. Quite simply, the relationships that were developed in the residency teams allowed for sharing of ideas, resources, and feedback. With the amount of sharing that happened, an underlying sense of reciprocity

occurred. I'm careful not to call it obligation but I sensed there was a strong will to not take advantage of other team members' generosity. As Tina put it; "It was one of those, you gave me a gift, and I've got to find one for you." This collaboration occurred in many forms.

Sharing ideas. Sharing of ideas was mentioned by most participants. The MES courses are created in a manner such that discussion forums are integral to the course structure. Often a set of readings will be assigned and a discussion is set up (with varying expectations) for the students to interact with each other, the instructor, and the content. Dawson reflected on critiquing articles in online discussions; "I think what happened is you got 10 different viewpoints and often what I would pick to be the thing that stood out for me, would be different from eight other people. And it would be funny because sometimes they would be very different and sometimes it would be very similar and so I think you got an idea of different people's perspectives on things."

Tina loved being online and shared that, "we'd post questions to each other about stuff. It felt more like we were always linking; we were doing a lot of linking of ideas or articles." Bob told two stories of how he shared his ideas with team members on how they could handle work situations and assignments. The collegiality extended beyond coursework. In an attempt to provide an area for the students to socialize, a discussion forum was created called "Lounge" where often times I came across messages posted to anyone asking for work-related advice. Fellow students were often willing to share their perspective. Irene mentioned; "It got so that we learned to look out for each other and to

help each other not just with learning needs but also personal needs and professional needs. And there was a lot of sharing of expertise and knowledge."

Casey told a story of a telephone conversation on her cell while in a grocery store. She was discussing ideas on how to conduct their research projects with another team member, all the while hoping nobody from her community would hear "this alien language." She expressed a sense of fun but also ease in that "it was nice to have one more person that we could actually quickly talk and clarify for each other." Tina thought the dynamic of the residency team was extremely helpful; "depending on what it was you wanted to talk about or have a conversation about or reflect on or find in research, you would go to different people."

Sharing resources. Sharing of resources was also expressed by many. Since residency team members regularly had to communicate their area of interest in a possible research project and many assignments revolved around this exploration, sharing resources was possible and appreciated. People were "linking things and finding things from other readings that they can use." Joyce felt "an incredible generosity" in her residency team. "People were sharing things all over the place…take mine and then we'll take her's…" Tina told of her experience working through assignments and finding information online; "we would even cut and paste things. We would take a piece of it and send it to somebody – this really fits to what I just read about what you wrote and this really connects well. Or you would just give them the site and tell them to go look at it."

Sharing feedback. Sharing in the form of feedback occurred for most participants. Although never set as "collaborative assignments" in the true definition, residency team members would provide each other with feedback on assignments and their research project. This sharing was unprompted and often irrespective of the courses. Casey said, "The feedback was really, really rich because we knew each other's projects so well because we were talking all the way through the process, not just check-in points and that made a big difference – it was on-going – and you can't do that if you're not finding other ways to stay connected." Irene said her team was "very quick to share" and that "there was a lot of feedback from the team." Bob mentioned that instructors could provide feedback as well but colleagues would present their perspective and "thoughts and feedback on what they could do and where they might be able to go."

Bob didn't think the sharing would have occurred at the high level it did without the residency teams. Team members had to share progress reports online as to how their research projects were unfolding. In his opinion it was very enjoyable to read the reports and see "Oh you're making progress" or empathize if things weren't going well such as not getting participants. In his opinion, "if it's just person A – ohhh person A didn't get any. Oh well."

Hesitation

Many of the students expressed that there was a little anxiety around the first online course, even though they had all met face-to-face. The apprehension wasn't related to the technology and perhaps that is due to the exposure we provided while they are

face-to-face. We introduced WebCT and Elluminate and had them use WebCT to submit their assignments. Therefore, their comfort level with the technology was high enough for it not to be a focus. Only one student commented that he wondered, "Is this technology going to work?" because he had just purchased a new computer at the end of the summer.

What was mentioned by most participants was their uncertainty of interacting with one another online. From the discussions it became clear that there were a few of them that weren't sure if they would like the online experience. Casey reflected on how she felt prior to going online; "I'm very much about relationships with people so I wasn't sure I was going to like the online part, but I did." Bob had a similar comment; "I wasn't sure about online or in-person. To me online just seemed so impersonal and it wasn't something that I was looking forward to but it worked well."

Most participants felt an initial angst with regard to the online discussions. Although I'm sure all of the participants have experienced interacting through mediums online like email, there was a hesitation because they didn't want to come across as "stupid." Online discussions make the student accountable by awarding grades for participation. Often expectations are detailed for criteria such as: how many times you have to comment on an article, how many times you have to respond to your colleagues, and how many words will fulfill the requirement. Casey expressed her unease around this process but followed it with her appreciation for it; "It's out there and other people can read this and so I felt vulnerable but I also felt in some ways then, an instructor or my community would actually know what my thoughts were or what I took from that…So if

I had been a complete idiot, I was really trusting that someone would let me know that gently." The first step in knowledge building was for the students to do their own sense-making, or active construction of meaning, by responding to the articles individually.

The process of interacting online is not automatic. As Casey pointed out, "I think something that really developed and I think many people were struggling with was, how do you read and respond and do that tactfully? I also found that it's tricky too because it's not like a conversation because I'm not getting a reaction." Tina also spoke of the developmental aspect of interacting online, "It was really interesting to see how talking on the surface stopped and we started to get really deep into issues. So that grew. That was a very interesting evolution to see. And I remember when it happened – finally. And it just got richer." She actually found it very frustrating at first when people were "doing a regurgitation" of the articles they read but then finally it happened that they "moved passed the polite conversation and the carefulness" to really get into it.

One of Denise's fears was interpretation; "The written word can be taken differently when you don't put body language and everything behind it." Many participants expressed the importance of sounding intelligent and coherent and the time and effort this took. Tina said, "I really agonized a lot about what I was writing at the beginning. I think I even wrote it out in hand first or in a Word document and then I cut and paste it one it was perfect because I was nervous that it wouldn't be good enough."

Irene spoke of the same thing; "I think there was a lot of care that went into it. I know that personally, sometimes, I would type up something and I would leave it and then go back to it the next day and see whether that's exactly what I had intended." Steve just simply felt that "it's so much more work trying to communicate through the keyboard than it is verbally." Denise was nervous; "The first time I did it – because there is no spell-check – I did all my work in Word and I ran it through spell check. I read it 18 times backwards and forwards to make sure I didn't look like an idiot. Then I hit "post" and clenched my teeth and wondered what the response would be."

A couple of the participants expressed hesitation with how the technology organized the discussion forums. However, both were quick to say there were "good dialogues that happened" and "it was minor…it's something you just had to get used to." The points are important for online educators. Dawson talked about how, "the strands would get a little convoluted because you know you go off on one tangent and it was hard to go back five steps and make a comment sometimes and have it show up in the thread." Steve had a similar notion, "the problem is, if you don't get in early or if you're not the one that instigates it or responds to it, it's harder to feel part of that thread. So then you can have this great dialogue happening but you're just watching it from the outside."

Time

Given that the MES program is geared for individuals who are working full-time, it is not a surprise that time and the underlying premise of how to balance everything in life came up as a theme. What was surprising for me was that the students did not focus a

significant amount of attention to it. Perhaps because they are so used to handling multiple tasks as educators with busy lifestyle and most with families, they do not know of any other way. I was made explicitly aware of this on one particular interview. My interview with Denise was at her school. We sat in a "storage room" converted into a one-on-one place for teachers and students. There were walls of books and a tiny table with two children-sized chairs. This environment did not seem to distract Denise but I was very conscious of the sounds of children outside the door and once we were interrupted by the door opening. Although not distracted, I do think that Denise was paying close attention to the sounds in the hallway that indicated when the students went outside for lunch break and then when they came back in. After the silence indicated that the students were mostly back in their classrooms, she asked if she could leave for a minute to check her student-teacher. This did come at the end of the interview but it was clear to me that her students were in the back of her mind during the interview. This example provided me with a small glimpse into an educator's life – how to "steal" minutes of the day to get the work done.

Time as flexibility was something that arose out of an appreciation for this program's online structure. Allowing students to "log on at just whatever hour" as Casey said, created the space for them to be online when it worked for them. Tina commented on how valuable it was to "read somebody's writing and go away for awhile and think about it. You don't have to respond in a conversation right now. And that's a great quality to this element." Although the flexibility of asynchronous communication was positive, there was mentioning of the reality that it was hard to balance everything. Time

as a barrier was an obvious indicator that these participants do lead complex and multi-dimensional lives. Time was an issue in the beginning of the program. Bob reflected on how it was a learning process to juggle everything; "when am I going to do it and how many hours is it going to take and all that; how often do I need to go on?" And time was an issue in possible future relationships with residency team members for some participants. Joyce concluded, "For me it's time. That's the biggest barrier that I've come across basically in, just in general." Irene agreed, "Because number one, as educators, we had said at the beginning, you're just so busy and you don't have the time."

The structure of the residency teams was again appreciated by most participants for the fact that it allowed them to focus their "time" and attention on a limited number of colleagues due to our expectation that they will engage with their residency team first and foremost. Steve very rarely responded to anyone from another residency team; "There is barely enough time to read your own residency team's than to look at other people's postings. You only have so much time to post." Casey recounted a similar experience of mostly communicating with her own residency team and excluding herself from other teams; "…and I just couldn't make their business be my business. I really felt like I had to limit my time and so when I did, I ended up looking at it like, so this is the group that I felt like I had the support [of] and it was only just – I think occasionally – I really went on a touched base with (name of student) one time or with (name of student), but it was really, really quickly but otherwise not." Tina tried to check all the residency team's discussions at first but soon found it was too overwhelming to keep up with it because of

the "amount of back and forth dialogue that goes on." And so she decided, "I'm only going to focus on mine."

Students would often send personal emails to members of their residency teams for issues of privacy but also respect for time. Casey recalled how she corresponded with another team member; "I could email her and say, you know I really enjoyed that, and so I tried not to put that out there because I didn't want everyone to read this sort of social banter. If we posted, it should be worth reading…" Denise's group kept their emails within certain team members; "You realized that for efficiency sake you could only do it with a few people…" When postings were put out there that were deemed inappropriate Denise said the group got annoyed because, "we didn't have time for that."

The program made use of the occasional Elluminate synchronous session. We never mandated attendance due to their situations as full-time educators and as adults with multiple roles but we did encourage it with a result of great participation rates. Joyce sensed that "people were concerned about wasting their time and not that we didn't want to be connected or things like that but that people did comment about time being of the essence or valuable and not wanting it to be not worthy of their experience." We also never mandated synchronous chat applications but did make them available for residency teams to use if they so desired. Again, time was a barrier. Irene noted, "we also attempted using chat. That didn't work because time was always a factor and you could never say, well let's meet tonight at eight o'clock online – you can't in a spontaneous way." Bob

summarized it appropriately; "people are busy and the reality is, whatever type of course you're taking, you're not thinking about it all the time."

Trust

The aspect of creating and maintaining relationships that comes up the most in the literature is trust. As such, it was also a large focus in the data. Trust came in two forms in relation to students working together (mostly in residency teams): feeling safe to have deep meaningful dialogues and feeling able to challenge each other. An added component to the trust theme is the experience of developing trust with instructors they had not met. It was not represented as dis-trust, but more so as a process of building it. An initial interpretation of this comes, in my estimation, from the effect of not having the rapport developed, as mentioned earlier. Further exploration of this will happen in the discussion chapter.

Trust through safety. Trust through safety is an important aspect of online communities. Many authors acknowledge the importance of safe online environments to create communities, just as it is important in face-to-face environments. Most of the participants expressed a feeling of safety within their residency teams. But obviously that was not an automatic element that just occurred from being in teams, it had to be developed. Tina mentioned how it "took some time to trust and build that trust. And when you get to know people and know that you can trust saying whatever you need to say and it's safe, then you were fine." She explained how going online was the first place she would go in the morning and she looked forward to it; "It was very comfortable; it

was a very secure place, if felt very safe." Casey had an almost identical statement about loving going online and how it, "felt very safe and very comfortable."

Reflecting on getting to know her residency team through a collaborative assignment face-to-face, Casey said, "not only did we get to know each other quite quickly, it was a safe way to do it. But then you quickly had a purpose which caused us to get together and to trust each other…But what was really important, I think, was that it was a small enough group of people that we could feel safe in just saying what we wanted to do." Irene simply said the online environment "felt safe" and that knowing other people didn't have access to their WebCT site created a "feeling of being secure." Bob talked about the process of figuring out their research methods with each other; "If I was going to do something that I wasn't sure was ethical and I didn't know the people in the online course, I probably wouldn't ask them. Whereas when you know the people you can say, is it okay to have chocolate bars with the surveys?" He also reflected on how his team members could be honest and open when they weren't sure about things or when they were uncomfortable. He didn't think that would have happened with the whole cohort; "People felt more comfortable saying things and 'going out on limbs' maybe that they wouldn't have if they were strangers."

Casey expressed that she would have found it difficult to put in the effort to interact, commit, and help a stranger online. Whereas, she went on to say (about her residency team), "we have a vested interest to help each other to be successful and so we feel safe to share, trust, and willing to risk and know that it's going to be okay." Joyce

also talked about a comparison of knowing and not knowing people online; "But if you don't have that kind of experience it could have taken another connotation to them but I think our residency team was really balanced and for that I am really grateful and I think trust is a big part."

Tina thought that her residency team would agree when she admitted that she preferred talking to instructors that she had met; "and if you were engaged with somebody you had never met, you hoped that you would get to meet them face-to-face." She went on to explain,

> And I think that's a piece of the learning that was really important – that we knew [the instructors]. It's a little like being in a chat room and you don't know who you're talking to – it's kinda creepy. So I found that I didn't engage as much with somebody that I had no relationship with – or I hadn't met – compared to my engagement with somebody I already knew and started to have a relationship and trusted. I can't even tell you what the name of the person was now, but I said the least amount possible because I didn't know who she was. I had no clue. So that was just weird.

Trusting to challenge. Trusting each other enough to challenge one another and encourage broader perspectives was an outcome of the residency team structure and something that as a program, we are proud to have as a result. Clearly, one of the goals of a masters program is to promote critical thinking and knowledge creation, therefore, trusting colleagues to have dialogues that engage and challenge is instrumental in

achieving that outcome. Most participants acknowledged this ability in some form or another. Dawson stated that, "you felt like you could voice criticism of somebody else's opinion because you knew the person well enough that you weren't stepping on the toes of somebody you didn't know well." He went on to say that there was very much a human element in their online discussions of articles. Colleagues could say to each other, "I know you are this way and I knew you would say that but what about this?" Bob talked about interacting with colleagues in the first online course; "someone would write something – you could agree or disagree with it depending on your interpretation of the article and then you would respond to that."

Casey said that through the trust that was developed she could be persuaded to rethink things; "I don't want to just be swayed but I want to look at other points of view. But I think that I'm more willing to try that with people that I have a relationship with." She went on to explain how they would challenge each other online;

> So they might say, can you tell me more about that? Or I'm not sure how you got to that level or they might mention something like, well, that's interesting that you got that perception, I thought it was really this. And then I would look at it and think, oh yeah, I think I can see why they would think that and so then I would respond back and say yeah, I can see how you got that.

Denise had a similar comment about how her residency team "added points that made us think about different things. We knew each other's personalities so, for instance, if I would lean heavily in one direction in my comments, somebody would say, well what

about this? It challenges you a bit. And we all recognized that we had to challenge each other and you couldn't just say 'great job' in response to a posting. Our comments were not judgmental in any way." After the trust was established, Tina said, "conversations got a lot deeper and we were looking more broadly at things and turning them upside-down and people were gaining confidence in challenging questions and throwing them out there instead of worrying about whether or not they would be dismissed. Still challenged by people but not in a frightening way – in an exciting way now." Irene explained how "at times we tried to manipulate each other, taking on a certain viewpoint, especially if the assignment was set up as such. We would debate and so on." Joyce thought her residency team was amazing, "because you had discussions that went way beyond the surface. It was candid; it was frank; it was debateful. You felt comfortable being, I don't really want to use this word confrontational, but you could say what you need to say in a respectful way and know that you didn't loose anything."

Denise expressed a similar preference to working with instructors she knew or had met before. In recounting her interactions with "new" instructors and how you "read more into it" when you don't know people, she said, "it was more difficult because you don't know the personalities and you're not sure of the message behind the written comments. You can't be as blunt. It's sort of like when I'm writing home to a parent. I have to do the, 'just wanted to let you know…little concerned…thought you'd appreciate…blah, blah, blah' so that it's received the correct way."

Casey expressed that because of the risk-taking that she had done with her group, they knew her and her work. Therefore, she would, "rather have that knowledgeable support group with me than have a more impartial outsider looking in and evaluating and giving feedback. She'd rather have the support group "for better or worse."

Support

All of the participants expressed how they felt confident in knowing that there was support while online. For these participants, it was not technical support that was the focus, unlike some other studies, but more support from fellow residency team members and from the instructional and program staff. Being online was a new and often exciting but scary time for some of the students, so this constant reassurance that they were not left "alone" in cyberspace created a feeling of security, as expressed above in the trust through safety, but also it convinced the students that they belonged and would be looked after. A few participants mentioned that although online learning necessitates a certain amount of independence, support from colleagues and instructors was pertinent. Commitment to each other was high. While balancing multiple roles in their lives, this reassurance created a space for learning.

Instructional staff support. Support from instructional staff was appreciated. Our instructional teams were often made up of a group of professors, sessional instructors, and teaching assistants. Each instructional team member would communicate with all of the residency teams online so that there was a range of expertise and experience in every dialogue. One instructor or TA was not responsible for one team for the whole term but

rather for one (two week) module at a time. This did not seem to confuse the students, but rather most of them appreciated the diversity and support. Irene felt that the instructional team met her needs as a learner and she found everyone empathetic; "From time to time I might have something I'm not certain about – an uncertainty about maybe a concept or maybe I'm not reading it right – and if I throw it out online, you might come online and say, 'no Irene, you are right.' And that assurance helps a great deal in my learning engagement." Tina said if the fellow residency team members didn't know the answer to something, anything, she would "just give us [the MES program staff] a call. It was simple."

Casey recalled a story of receiving an email asking her how things were going because it was noted that she only posted a minimum requirement. She reflected on her reaction to it; "it took me quite awhile to realize that they were concerned about my well-being. And she was being the thoughtful, supportive person I wanted her to be." Joyce didn't think she would ever have an opportunity to complete her masters and she contributed support as a factor in her "huge accomplishment"; "to have that kind of support every time you want to quit or every time you say 'this is too much, I can't do this', and you had the support of the Faculty or people like yourself who are part of the program, who lay out all the options." Tina thought the instructors were "always supportive" and committed to getting the students through the program. She was reassured by this; "I noticed it right away and I hugged it. It was so important." Irene pointed out, "You knew that the TAs would sort of attend to your learning needs; you new the instructor or instructors would sort of pay attention to what you had to say. And

so therefore, I think it actually ensured the engagement more so than sometimes in the face-to-face discussions."

Residency team support. Most of the participants expressed how they would often turn to fellow residency team members for help and assistance. One participant said, "without that initial sense of a small residency team really trying to support each other, I don't think I would have felt as successful." Casey talked about instances when she felt it was important to keep in touch with specific team members; "I think that there was a certain level of – not a certain level – I think there was quite a high level of commitment to the people and to making sure that they were okay." Steve mentioned that how his team would "make encouraging comments long the way" and he expressed that it was "nice."

Many would form specific partnerships within their teams based on need, especially in the second year when they worked on their research projects. Denise talked of how her team was "supportive, helpful, and got to it. We just sort of looked for each other's strengths and helped with the weaknesses." Tina's team noted strong points within members as well; "All of those strengths of those people became very clear and we all called on all of them a lot through the process."

Casey noted that she felt she had a commitment to her residency team that was very important to her. She spoke of specific individuals in her group that she was working closely with and their commitment to making sure everyone completed; "We

said we're going to do this and we're going to do this. That's how we feel." She felt that it was important to be "somewhat independent" online but also felt "like it's important to have the support that come from this little group of people." Having a small group was a key feature of this support structure because having more people, "would have made my circle bigger than I could cope with." Bob felt it with his residency team; "it's that support that you can say what you want and you can be there for each other. I think that's because you know each other that you support." Joyce mentioned how her residency team kept her going; "Knowing that someone 400 miles away is thinking about you and know that they know the challenges that you're facing but that they have hope for you is an inspiration to just keep going."

There were moments when it felt more appropriate for some of these participants to approach their team members than go back to the instructors. Denise recalled how if they had any trouble with anything, "we were emailing back and forth. 'Okay, she told me this – help!'" Joyce talked of emailing her residency team too; "I would send an email off saying, 'I still haven't got an answer to this question. What did you do?'" Bob recounted the same situation of emailing each other for help; "it's being able to call someone or email someone and say, 'any idea what we're supposed to do for this assignment? I don't get it?' Where you don't always want to call your instructor every time!"

Some spoke of the future; Denise said, "I would have no problem picking up the phone or emailing anybody on that team if I needed help." Joyce said the same of some

of her residency team members; "I can whole-heartedly say that if I ever needed anything, they'd be an email or a phone call away." Casey hoped the support her residency team gave each other in their jobs would continue; "there's that kind of networking thing that's going to continue."

Unexpected Finding

One unexpected finding that did come out of the interviews was around the notion of gender. I chose not to call this a theme for two reasons, 1) I felt it was not strong enough to be a theme on its own but was still worth mentioning, and 2) I did not incorporate any of the literature on gender and online learning communities into my literature review. Therefore, I have limited knowledge about this aspect of the field. It was an interesting finding and it definitely caused me to pause and ponder what this meant for the participants.

A few female participants mentioned gender-relations in regard to interacting. In both cases this came up around the notion of smaller "cliques" forming in the residency teams. Each time it was suggested that males and females both gravitated toward each other in terms of communicating and on more informal relations. This sub-grouping by gender was definitely not apparent within the other residency teams as was noted by their use of specific names (both male and female) in terms of interaction and other group dynamics.

Summary

As noted, each theme – rapport, sharing, hesitation, time, trust, and support – was directly related to the concept of relationships. This strong occurrence was indicated within each area through direct quotes of thoughtful recollections. As a summary, it is easy to continue to use the voices of my participants. Of the participants that had already completed the program, most of them spoke of the culmination of the program and of the experience. In conclusion, most felt something similar to Tina's eloquent summary of her sense of the whole experience;

> I think there's also a time when people started to withdraw, like they'd had enough. And that happened near the end of the whole thing. So the dialogues, the conversations just faded away. And you know what's interesting is with all that fading, the relationships faded too. You're with this group of people for this intense experience and you're all there for each other all the way through and then you know when it's time to recede and go back to your own lives. It's this lovely, natural process that takes place that everybody is okay with. Could I still go online and check in with them? Sure! But it was the experience that kept us tight.

Chapter Five: Discussion with Tree Metaphor

A wealth of findings that described experiences of online graduate students were presented in the previous chapter. By subsuming particulars into more general classes, a process whereby you "shuttle back and forth between first-level data and more general categories that evolve and develop through successive iterations until the category is 'saturated'" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 256) an outline for organizing data emerged. This outline will be used as a framework for organizing the discussion as it consists of constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that tie back to the literature on collaborative learning and social capital. I chose not to address each interview question separately because they were intended as guides for a larger conversation about the experiences and I was not looking to find "answers." As such, I found solace in using a metaphor to help emphasize what the participants were saying, my understanding of it, and how it related to the literature.

Online learning communities are complex and involve a number of interrelated factors, many of which I tried to consider in my literature review. Because the concept is so large and evolving, I have endeavored to focus on two constructs as I see them relating to my findings and their relationship with online learning communities: collaborative learning and social capital. Both of these constructs encapsulate the social constructivist theory that online learning communities are built upon.

Collaborative learning has many meanings, definitions, and uses. However, the core value of collaborative learning remains the same: learner-centered interactions. Social capital theory is equally multi-dimensional and for the same reason, I have chosen Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) work that describes social capital's role in creating intellectual capital. Three dimensions: structural, cognitive, and relational are explored each with sub-dimensions that directly influence the creation of intellectual capital. This work was important to me because of the implied outcome of knowledge creation from graduate level courses. Although I did not choose to study knowledge creation, the research in both social capital and collaborative learning have indicated that learning is achieved through these processes (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Stacey, 2005) and this relates to online learning communities with all concepts having relationships at the core. The experience of an online graduate learner is affected by the relationships with all these concepts and the interrelatedness among them.

I found myself needing to create a visual representation to better organize my discussion and therefore turned to a metaphor, as a way to connect findings to theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I chose to describe my interpretation of the findings by relating them to a tree. The whole experience of online cohort learning communities, in my study, was heavily influenced by three structural design factors. These included: 1) face-to-face meetings, which in the MES students were in direct contact with each other for two, three-week summer residencies at the University of Alberta; 2) group size – it was apparent that all participants agreed that their smaller residency team structure was more conducive than whole cohorts for forming the relationships that were integral for

each category and; 3) facilitators – most participants felt that the instructors played a significant role as facilitators in their online experience, and that meeting the instructors face-to-face prior to the online experience was almost a necessity. These three factors are like the roots of a tree; if all are present, the roots will grow deep and provide the nutrients and support for the growth and sustainability of a tree. Online communities do not happen on their own, they require effort and monitoring for growth and maintenance. The presence of each of the three factors aids in the development of strong roots of an online community.

Upon intensive reflection on the themes that emerged from the data, it was obvious to me that "relationship" surfaced as the core element for each theme. "Relationship" was an important aspect in all themes, whether it was the relationship between participant and residency team members, participant and instructional team member(s), or relationship with the technology. This is like the trunk of the tree. From here, branches are grown. The trunk must be healthy if a tree is to live and relationships must exist if an online community is to thrive.

Branches grow from the trunk. In my metaphor, the branches represent concepts that describe the graduate students' experiences of an online cohort learning community. These concepts or branches are related to group dynamics: cohesiveness, communication, and norms. Within each concept, the themes that were discussed in Chapter Four are subsumed. These themes (or branches) arise from the roots because of the impact each structure has on the experiences, are carried up from the trunk because of the common

element of relationships, and in turn can impact the formation of leaves (satisfaction and knowledge creation) depending on their level of existence. Each branch is significant and inclusive by itself; however interdependence may exist among them, just as branches may overlap. These concepts were not determined to be all-encompassing nor does this necessarily cover all the experiences of a cohort online learning community, as such, more branches may be grown.

Finally, if a tree is healthy, leaves will grow. In my findings, if the structural design factors were present, and the concepts or branches existed, then the students were satisfied. Satisfaction, no matter what the definition, plays some role in every adult learner's journey. Adult education literature suggests that student satisfaction is a key factor in students' general success and in their decision to see a program through to completion (Chyung, 2002; Hendry, 1983). As well as satisfaction, a potential outcome of online learning communities is knowledge development. Although this was only assumed through my research with these participants because it was not directly studied, it can be concluded, using the research of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) that social capital can lead to intellectual capital. These outcomes of the online community experience are like the leaves on a tree. If a tree is healthy, it will produce leaves (in season, of course). From the findings one might infer that if an online learning community is healthy, students will be satisfied and knowledge will be created and hence, these become the leaves.

Each of these aspects of the tree and how they relate to my findings will be discussed.

The Roots

Seeing is Belonging

The face-to-face interactions that occurred in the summer residencies were integral in developing relationships and thus influenced the experiences of the online learning community. Students recollected the positive aspects and outcomes of their encounters together. They spoke of familiarity, safety, comfort, ease, and even necessity. Examples of these were interspersed through the interviews: "So much is familiar with personality traits and being able to identify where people are coming from…but if you don't have that kind of experience [summer residency] it could have been really intimidating." "The two summers we spent together – you really know each other." "We've connected with people throughout that time on campus." "It was easy [to go online] because we knew each other from the summer residency." "For me it's the face-to-face that makes the enduring relationships."

Just as they expressed strong emotions and almost a necessity about meeting fellow students and instructors face-to-face, they complimented it with expressions about not knowing these people. "Like why would I go through the effort of doing that with a stranger?" "I don't think we would have engaged with the content at all if we hadn't had the opportunity to meet." "We preferred talking to people that we'd met." When participants referred to not knowing fellow students, it was in reference to other online

courses outside the MES program or from conversations with people that had taken online courses that did not involve a face-to-face aspect. Most expressed dissatisfaction with the idea or the experience of it, mainly due to lack of context. They felt that if they did not know the students' context and likewise, the students did not know theirs, then a rich dialogue could not occur. Trust was not easily established and therefore, activities like sharing and support were less likely to occur.

Not meeting some instructors was common in the MES program. Only a few instructors taught in the summer and subsequently online in the fall or winter, therefore, having an instructor that they had never met face-to-face was inevitable. Again, dissatisfaction was evident and again it was mostly due to the lack of context. Although the instructors attempted a brief introduction, it was not elaborate enough for the students to feel that they understood where the instructor was coming from and therefore what their online comments might infer. Students did not feel like the instructors knew them and their situations. Stilted and purposely short conversations were noted, where they would do the "bare minimum" for instructors they did not know. Granted, each instructor is different, but the MES prides itself on selecting instructors who provide gentle and non-intrusive facilitation.

The importance of face-to-face meetings in developing relationships is found in the literature. Indeed, Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003) claim that studies on trusting behaviour in social capital literature "emphasize relationships, which require face-to-face interaction" (para. 40). Although not all situations are conducive to in-person

interactions, where it is possible, studies have found it to be a positive factor for building online learning communities (Lipnack & Stamps in Oldfield & Morse, 2006; Pachler & Daly, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). The importance of meeting face-to-face is consistent with Conrad's (2002a) study of similar context where she found that meeting face-to-face prior to going online "had been valuable to them as a first step in building community" (para. 25).

Size Matters!

The group's (or residency team) size as a structure also came across as integral for developing relationships that are the core of each theme. Having a smaller group to interact with was imperative for most of the participants because it provided an opportunity to really get to know each other, trust each other, and feel safe. Statements that reaffirmed this included examples such as: "People know each other's personalities and so the relationships continue to grow within that system"; "What was really important was that it [the residency team] was a small enough group of people that we could feel safe in just saying what we want to." "People would say things that they weren't sure about or uncomfortable with and they could be honest and open, whereas if it wasn't in the group, I don't know if that would have happened." "I absolutely think you would dismantle things if you didn't have residency teams. I think it would change the program dramatically if you didn't have those people that you were connected with." "It would be impossible to have the type of dialogue – the personal dialogue – that you had without having the residency teams. The cohort was just too big to be able to know

everybody and I think you really got to know the personalities of people and I think it would be impossible if you were in your whole cohort in one group."

Small group size for online collaborative learning is supported by studies such as Du, Zhang, Olinzock, and Adams (2008). The researchers found that one of the factors that influenced students' participation and quality of online discussions in a collaborative setting was group size. Their participants felt more comfortable and better acquainted with one another in a small group size of four to five people. Similarly, Palloff and Pratt (2007) note that group size is "of major importance in an online classroom" and do suggest five to ten as "an ideal number" (p. 82). In a situation similar to the MES program, these authors would suggest that large groups be broken down into teams "thus promoting an environment in which collaborative work is necessary" (p. 82). And finally, Hiltz's (1998) recommendation of small group size in online collaborative learning was strong, yet not specific enough to recommend a certain number of people.

Facilitator as Enabler

I was not expecting to find facilitators as having a very significant influence in the online learning communities. Although the literature is plentiful in the area of roles and functions of instructors, I did not anticipate direct conversations around this because of my focus on the students. However, it was apparent that these participants placed a high value on the instructors. They wanted support, attention, and to build a relationship with the instructors. This is mostly consistent with the literature. The role the instructor played in collaborative online learning environments is key, as insisted by Kukulska-Hulme

(2004). The instructor's role was to be a facilitator who "helps learners develop dynamic communities" (p. 277). Palloff and Pratt (2007) also speak of the instructor as facilitator. They maintain that the facilitator "provides gentle guidance and a framework" (p. 110) so that the students are able to explore the material without restriction. In a situation conducive to knowledge creation at a graduate level, they suggest providing general topics within a body of knowledge for the students to read and comment about, and avoiding lectures as much as possible. Strikingly familiar, this mirrors the design of the MES courses as well as the role of the instructor.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) listed teaching presence as one of their three components making up their model of online communities of inquiry. They broke down teaching presence to include course design, activities and assessment, as well as facilitation of the course. Collins and Berge (1996) described four categories of conditions for successful online instruction: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Of importance to this study is the social function in which the instructor created a friendly social environment that promoted human relationships and group cohesiveness. This is consistent with Barab, Thomas, and Merrill's (2001) findings where they highlighted the "importance of the instructor in creating a warm and open learning environment" (p. 133). And finally, Kukulska-Hulme (2004) concluded that the online instructor's role is principally a facilitator in which their main role is helping learners develop dynamic communities to experience the best kind of learning.

Similar to the findings in the literature, many statements made by the participants did determine that instructor presence was highly important. "It doesn't matter what model you use, the teacher/instructor is really the driving force on how learning takes place. Even if you are online with four or five different instructors, it's still about relationships." "I felt that you were talking to people – instructors – that were also willing to learn with you." "You knew the TAs would attend to your learning needs, and you knew the instructor or instructors would pay attention to what you had to say." "You had the support of faculty." These findings were consistent with Conrad's (2002b) study where she found the notion of instructor remained "an essential element in the teaching-learning process" (p. 92).

Although the literature on collaborative learning and online learning communities points to the significance of the instructor in creating an ideal learning environment, what did not appear to be a finding was the need for this instructor/facilitator to provide the students with support. Participants in my study were appreciative of the faculty as noted in the theme, instructional team support. Students knew they could count on instructors to meet their learning needs as well as emotional needs. What stood out in the findings were the comments on the strength of the instructors' support for getting them through the program. Perhaps this level or ideal of support is not mentioned in the literature because it is either inferred as part of the facilitator role, or because our students were recognizing it from a more holistic view in a programmatic-sense rather than per course, due to the (often) recurrence of the same instructors through numerous courses.

In a more general sense, the idea of support as fundamental for adult learners is found in the literature. In her study of a cohort graduate degree program for teachers, Kasworm (2003) found that strong program supports led students to believe that their time was valued, and their needs valued and recognized as distinct from those of traditional fulltime students. Husson & Kennedy (2003) stress the importance of "both high-quality instruction and superior customer services" (p. 54).

As much as they appreciated the instructors for their part in the educational experience, participants wanted to have met them face-to-face. "I found that I didn't engage as much with somebody I had no relationship with, or I hadn't met, than I would with somebody I already knew and started to have a relationship and trusted." "When some other people [instructors] that we didn't know came online, it was more difficult because you don't know the personalities and you're not sure of the message behind the written comments." As mentioned above, research has found that face-to-face interactions positively influenced online learning communities. However, these studies all focused on the perceptions of the student-to-student contact and I did not come across similar findings in regard to students meeting instructors face-to-face and the impact of that experience.

The Trunk

Relationships are at the core of my findings and therefore, naturally became the part of the tree that grew directly from the foundational structures and from where the specific group experiences grow. The "attachment was so strong" to both their residency

teammates as well as to their instructors that they had met. The relationships developed out of sharing of contexts, backgrounds, history, and similar experiences. The warm and open learning environment that occurred face-to-face may have contributed to the establishment of relationships, but the individuals have to be responsive, accepting, and genuine for the relationships to flourish and grow. Thankfully, and perhaps because of the positive outcomes that naturally occurred rather quickly, the MES participants, their residency teams, and the instructors developed healthy relationships with each other. The specific affects of these relationships on the online experiences cannot be directly correlated but rather inferred based on the words of the participants. The participants were clear that the relationships were positive and helpful and that the success of their individual programs was directly related to these relationships and what transpired from them. Relationships related back to the literature through each of the concepts in the following section. Within each one, I try to address relationships directly and sometime indirectly because of the obvious connections.

The Branches

In my tree metaphor, the branches represent concepts that describe the graduate students' experiences of an online cohort learning community. These concepts or branches are related to group dynamics: cohesiveness, communication, and norms. Within each concept, the remaining themes that were discussed in Chapter Four are subsumed. Some of the themes can be found within more than one concepts or branches. This reiterates the interconnectedness of these themes.

Cohesiveness

Cohesiveness refers to "the degree of attraction people feel toward the team and their motivation to remain members" (McShane, 2004). This aspect of a group dynamic is important for their success as a team. The influence of cohesiveness is based on emotional experiences: the development of rapport amongst members, feelings of support, reciprocal sharing, and trust. Each of these themes that arose from the data are supported by the literature on collaborative learning and social capital.

Development of rapport. Clear from the findings was the impact of the structural design on the development of rapport for participants. The feeling of knowing fellow students and some instructors when they went online was a direct outcome of the face-to-face summer residencies: "Having the face-to-face experience gave me the prior knowledge about the members and about the instructors, so if gave me more confidence as to how I should relate to other members and the teaching staff." And being able to develop those relationships was made possible because of the smaller residency team numbers. The development of rapport created a sense of membership within the residency teams; words like "connection" and "personal" were used to describe the feeling amongst residency team members. This sense of "identification" with a group of people is found in Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) relational dimension of social capital. Identification with a group positively influenced the anticipation and motivation to combine and exchange knowledge. The authors cite many sources that note significant barriers to information sharing, learning, and knowledge creation that can occur when groups have contradictory identities.

Similar to "identification" Palloff and Pratt (2007) noted that coalescence, or sense of group, has a strong connection to the formation of an actual online learning community. Cho, Lee, Stefanone, and Gay (2005) suggested that communal identity based on strong personal relationships were qualities that make an ideal learning community. In my study, relationships obviously developed to the strength that was necessary for a communal identity to form since participants focused almost their entire discussions around their experiences within their residency team. Since the participants premised their responses about going online with the experience of meeting face-to-face first, it is apparent that the impact of this facilitated the rapport-building. They talked about "seeing" and "hearing" their residency team members in their online written postings. Again, an overlap of categories exists in that participants acknowledged that knowing each other built trust and context so that challenging each other and feeling comfortable appeared to be outcomes of these relationships.

A key feature that distinguishes collaborative learning from individual and competitive learning is its social nature, therefore, it is not surprising that Rourke (2000) concluded from other research "that students need to trust each other, feel a sense of warmth and belonging, and feel close to each other before they will engage willfully in collaboration and recognize the collaboration as a valuable experience" (para. 2). Kreijns, Kirschner, and Jochems (2003) maintained that a social dimension through social interaction must exist for collaborative online learning. The socio-emotional aspects of group forming and group dynamics related to the "processes that have to do with getting

to know each other, committing to social relationships, and developing trust and belonging" (p. 342). The authors noted that these are essential to developing a learning community.

Feelings of support. Participants in my study expressed their appreciation for the support they received from their fellow residency team members. Knowing that they had the support of their team created a sense of belonging and reassurance common in collaborative learning environments. Hiltz's (1998) findings indicated that collaborative learning was necessary for online learning communities to provide emotional support, sociability, and information and instrumental aid. The sense of support in my study came in various forms: encouraging words, answering questions, knowing who to turn to for assistance, and that underlying "inspiration to just keep going." As Roberts (1995) listed, developing a social support system for students was a benefit of collaborative learning. "Giving and receiving help and assistance" as well as "advocating increased effort and perseverance among peers" are both listed as behaviours in collaborative learning situations according to Johnson and Johnson (1996).

This sense of reciprocity Johnson and Johnson (1996) mention was a clear finding in my study; support was reciprocal with members often feeling a "commitment" to each other. This "obligation" is consistent with one of Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) aspects that made up the relational dimension of social capital. Since particular relations with people influence their behaviour, obligations that developed through working together

allowed people to absolutely rely on each other. This sense of obligation can apply as well to the reciprocal sharing that the residency team's experienced.

Reciprocal sharing. Through the development of relationships, the participants expressed an iterative sharing of three things: ideas, resources, and feedback. The first two types of sharing contributed to the overall cohesiveness because they contained an underlying sense of reciprocity. Linking ideas and sharing perspectives were common with the participants as they worked toward an overarching goal of knowledge creation. Providing each other with constructive feedback was enhanced because they "knew each other" and could personalize their responses appropriately. Likewise, participants shared resources that pertained to the courses and individual research projects because they had shared their details so intimately with each other along the journey. As well, students were found sharing resources and ideas and feedback about their professional careers. These "gifts", as one participant put it, were not to be taken advantage of, and therefore the tone was set for a culture of interdependence.

Common in the literature on collaborative learning, sharing, is fundamental to team work. One of the benefits of collaborative learning is that ideas are presented, shared, linked, and organized among peers (Harasim, 1997). This, of course, requires active instead of passive receipt of information. Participation and mutual engagement are two key criteria that an online collaborative learning environment must ensure for students to negotiate meaning (Sorensen, 2004). Similarly, Johnson and Johnson's (1996) list of behaviours in collaborative learning situations appears to have three items that

support the notion of sharing: exchanging resources and information; explaining elaborating information; and sharing existing knowledge with others.

To me, participation and engagement encompass the notion of sharing ideas. This "exchange" of ideas is expected in social capital as well, because the expectation for exchanging and combining knowledge influences access and motivation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Again, the interdependence of the categories emerges when one considers how the "obligation" and "commitment to group members" that was found in the feelings of support. Without support, sharing would probably not occur, and likewise, students would not be likely to support each other if they didn't feel the "giving" was a two-way street. But superseding both of these is the essential feeling of trust within and amongst team members.

Trust. Trust, through safety, is an important aspect of online communities. Many authors acknowledge the importance of safe online environments to create communities, just as it is important in face-to-face environments. However, Palloff and Pratt (2007) point out that there are some fundamental differences that online communities must acknowledge. These include but are not limited to: shared responsibility, rules, norms, roles, participation, rituals, spiritual issues, culture, language, vulnerability, ethics, and privacy. The authors maintained that if attention is paid to these issues, a foundation is created "that supports the purpose for being there and the purpose of the work together, as well as reinforcing the creation of a safe and secure environment" (p. 64).

Most participants in the study expressed that they felt a safe and secure environment within their residency teams online: "Not only did we get to know each other quite quickly but it was a safe way to do it." It was quite apparent that this feeling was not consistent with the whole cohort but rather it had developed within their teams. As one participant put it, "we sort of developed an invisible boundary." And although the WebCT site was constructed in such a way that the whole cohort could view any of the postings, participants rarely "lurked" in other groups. Even though nobody would know if there were lurkers from other residency teams, perhaps because they didn't do it, they might have assumed others did not as well. Overall, it did not appear to be a concern because participants spoke of feeling comfortable within WebCT. It was mentioned that knowing WebCT was a private site and not open to the public added feelings of security.

Collins and Berge (1996) mentioned that an environment must be created that both fosters trust among learners and the instructor, and seeks to promote a cooperative and collaborative environment, allowing students to learn from course materials, the instructor, and each other. Again, most participants in this study explained how they felt they could trust their residency team members, in particular, and therefore were able to have deep meaningful dialogues and take risks with each other. Having a relationship was obviously a precursor to trusting their team enough of challenge each other. They had to feel comfortable to give and receive the challenges, know each other's perspectives so they could ask the right questions, and keep it all respectful.

Risk taking and engaging in valued dialogues are outcomes or evidence of trust that are consistent with Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) relational dimension of social capital. Constantly recurring is the underlying notion of relationships; "where relationships are high in trust, people are more willing to engage in social exchange in general, and cooperative interaction in particular" (p. 254). Indeed, trust is considered a central variable to social capital, so much so that "researchers treat trust as if it can directly produce social capital" (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003). As mentioned above, interdependence of the behavioural categories may exist, and in regard to trust, Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003) insist that a prerequisite condition for trust to occur is awareness. In relation to my themes, awareness could be considered to be the same concept as rapport.

In conclusion, the influence of cohesiveness is congruent with the psychological construct that Wilson (2001) distinguished as characteristics that enabled a sense of community: belonging, trust, expected learning, and obligation.

Communication

Communication is another group dynamic concept that encompasses a number of the themes. Clearly communication is overlapping within and between themes and categories because it is necessary for building and maintaining relationships, the core of the findings. Communication refers to "the process by which information is transmitted and *understood* between two or more people" (McShane, 2004, p. 314). The emphasis on understanding is to indicate that "the sender's intended meaning is the essence of good

communication" (p. 314). Given that "computer-conferencing is essentially a many-to-many communication tool that structures information exchange and group interactions" (Harasim, 1990), it is not surprising to find the relevance and association with some of the themes.

Communication is not only apparent within many of the themes, it is also fundamental to the MES program's core values. Graduate seminars are often centered on dialogue and co-constructing knowledge through these discussions and the MES program is no different. However, the basic difference in how the dialogue or interaction is occurring when the students are online is that everything is communicated through text. This can have advantages and disadvantages for the sender and receiver. McShane (1996) indicated that face-to-face interaction is better for persuading the receiver because of the power of non-verbal cues as well as the advantage of immediate feedback. However, CMC has advantages as well. Warschauer (1997) claimed that in regard to collaborative learning, CMC created "the opportunity for a group of people to construct knowledge together, thus linking reflection and interaction" (p. 473). As well, he pointed out that the social dynamics of CMC have resulted in more equal participation with those who are traditionally shut out of discussions. Issues such as "turn-taking, interruption, balance, equality, consensus, and decision-making" (p. 473) are all proven to be different from those of face-to-face discussions. Bonk and Lawson, (2001) agreed that an "important component of collaboration is the discussion that occurs during task engagement" (p. 22).

First hesitation. Of interest to me was the theme of hesitation. Most of the participants discussed an initial angst about communicating online. This anxiety was not centered on the technology, as I thought it might have been initially, but around how their postings would read for their particular audience. Although it may not have been the first online course that these students had taken, not wanting to sound dumb and taking a long time to write and edit the postings were consistently common experiences among participants. However, comfort levels were quickly achieved where both of these hesitations lessened or perhaps ceased to exist. Although they had met face-to-face, the initial experience of going online provided a new medium for conversation with these particular people that they were not exposed to before. Clearly most had communicated via email but when the focus was on academic writing, their tensions increased. Nobody ventured to put a timeframe on it but they were quick to note that time was definitely a factor that precipitated their change in comfort levels. They knew they could not edit all their postings to perfection for lack of time.

This notion of hesitation was exceedingly consistent with Conrad's (2002c) study of how learner's experiences in the beginning of an online course contributed to the sense of well-being and engagement. When asked to provide an adjectival description of their feelings when starting a new course online, "learners responded with descriptions of fear and anxiety" (p. 208). This was constant regardless of whether it was their first online course or whether they had taken one or more.

Although Harasim (1990) noted that there are many positives to text-based interactions such as diminishing the stereotyping associated with high external social status or physical appearance, she did acknowledge that some "participants worry about the 'appearance' of their text." What is not apparent in any of the literature is an average length of time it might take before students feel comfortable. Based on my research , I infer that the findings to this would probably differ depending on whether the group had met face-to-face prior to going online.

The hesitation that a few of the participants mentioned around the structure of the online forums and the timing of getting involved was also found in the literature. The "rolling present: how does a user know whether a topic is still current or has been overtaken by another theme?" (Harasim, 1990, p. 47) is a common anxiety amongst online participants. Participants may feel isolated from the conversation if they log on to the discussion "late." However, my participants did not mention another commonly referred to online communication anxiety of "feeling of speaking into a vacuum" when a participant receives no immediate response to ideas and comments. Perhaps this is because we mandate a certain number of responses but (hopefully) more importantly because they feel a commitment to support each other.

Then sharing of feedback. Once the students had developed a sense of security and comfort after the initial anxiety disappeared, sharing of feedback occurred within the residency teams. Perhaps this was facilitated by the structure of the courses; often students were asked to provide each other with information regarding their research

projects and so feedback was requested along the journey. Regardless of the impetus behind the feedback, communication with residency team members became "fluid" and "rich." Participants found ways to communicate and stay in touch with certain residency team members outside the WebCT course when it was appropriate and desired. Emails and phone calls supplemented the communication through WebCT interactions.

Communicative competence is imperative in order for the interactions to have substance and meaning. Nunan (1993) reported communicative competence between participants as a key value that was central to distance education. I am left with the impression that participants felt their residency teams were able to communicate proficiently so that the messages of feedback, as well as the dialogue that challenged each other, was clear and meaningful. There was no mentioning of misinterpretations or of feedback taken the "wrong way" because they "knew each other" and subsequently how to communicate appropriate and personalized feedback. Again, participants reported that meeting face-to-face first set the tone for providing feedback. They presumed it was much more heartfelt and genuine compared to how they would have responded had they not met first.

Given that interaction is highlighted as a key component in online learning communities, it is not surprising that it could be found in the participants' responses. However, as indicated previously, interaction and presence are inextricably linked if a sense of belonging with a group is to be obtained (Picciano, 2002; Tu & McIassac, 2002). This sense of cohesiveness was reminiscent of the participants remembering visually and

auditorally their residency team members. A sense of knowing seemed to aid in the depth and level of interactions. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) also maintained that meaningful communication requires some sharing of context between parties which may come about through two ways: shared language and codes, and/or shared narratives. Both of these existed for the residency teams. The authors suggest that these two elements facilitate the creation of intellectual capital, through social capital "by acting as both a medium and a product of social interaction" (p. 253).

Harasim's (1990) emphasis on the social nature of the online learning environment supports interactive group communication. Her review of the literature indicated that group feedback, an outcome of group communication, assists group members in cognitive restructuring. As mentioned above, if knowledge creation is an assumed outcome of graduate seminars, then groups' feedback serves a necessary function. Participants in my study spoke highly of being able to give and receive feedback, but did not touch on what they felt were the outcomes of this process.

At the risk of sounding redundant, it must be noted that some of the aspects of the concepts overlap, communication might not have occurred to the effectiveness, depth, or constructiveness without the feelings of cohesiveness mentioned above. This resonates with the research that suggested at least some sharing of context between parties is essential for meaningful exchange (Boisot in Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). To further expand on this idea Nahapiet and Ghoshal suggested that sharing comes in two ways: "(1) through the existence of shared language and vocabulary and (2) through the sharing

of collective narratives" (p. 253). Ultimately these elements facilitated the creation of intellectual capital by acting as a medium and a product of social interaction

Norms

Norms are "the informal rules and expectations that groups establish to regulate the behaviour of their members" (McShane, 2004, p. 243). Many norms exist for MES students within their residency teams and within their cohorts. Coleman (in Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) suggests that "where a norm exists and is effective, it constitutes a powerful though sometimes fragile form of social capital" (p. 255). In the findings, there are a number of key norms that were recognized by many participants: respecting each others' time; supporting each other; challenging each other; and sharing ideas, resources, and feedback. Although it was an unexpected outcome, my emerging themes closely aligned with Johnson & Johnson's (1996) list of behaviours in collaborative learning situations. Of interest is the alignment of some behaviours to the norms the participants experienced: giving and receiving help and assistance; exchanging resources and information; sharing existing knowledge with others; giving and receiving feedback; challenging others' contributions; and advocating increased effort and perseverance among peers.

The clock is ticking. Time was presented as an issue by some of the participants. They lead multi-layered lives and therefore, trying to fit a masters degree into their already full lives came with some amounts of stress. As such, it was appreciated by the participants when other people respected their time. This might be as simple as sending

personal notes via email instead of posting them on WebCT where participants would have felt compelled to read it even if it did not pertain to them. They also appreciated when postings were relevant and course-related due to the constraint on time. Nobody wanted to read extraneous postings. As well, the use of Elluminate was left to a minimum and not a requirement so as to respect students' time. Participants recognized this and were thankful, as they were for the structure of the residency team so that they did not have to feel obliged to read all the cohorts' postings. As such, few of them made use of our open invitation to use Elluminate with their residency teams on an informal basis, citing time as a barrier.

This respect of and acknowledgement that time is a factor around how and what people post and do as a group creates a certain norm of behaviour. Although not specifically cited as a time issue, Conrad's (2002b) participants "had considered the nature and timing of their responses insofar as those responses would contribute to the dynamic of the group, to the learning at hand, or specifically to another learner's needs" (p. 62). This was followed by some participants' remarks about choices in responding and not wanting to encourage people "who went on and on" and responding to length (shorter is better) "due to time." Similarly, her participants were adult learners balancing more than just school.

Cooperation. As mentioned previously, participants set a culture of support within their residency teams. Members seemed to have an expectation of "taking care" of each other. For the most part, this was an emotional support structure that saw them through

assignment by assignment, course by course, through their research, and ultimately through the program. Many expressed that they would not have been able to complete the program without the support of their residency teammates. They "knew what each other was going through" and therefore seemed able to respond and react in appropriate and comforting ways.

Again, it is also important to re-highlight the culture of sharing that was recognized. Although sharing might have been encouraged through the structure of the courses that the MES program designs, I don't think any of us expected it to be so rich and fulfilling. According to one of the participants, "it was a very cool network." Both of these norms of cooperation – support and sharing – "can establish a strong foundation for the creation of intellectual capital" (p. 255). Clearly this cooperation is only attainable if the group members trust each other; both are key factors in social capital. Kukulska-Hulme (2004) concluded that in online collaborative learning groups, "a sense of community may be partly achieved through the adoption and evolution of norms of communication and online behaviour" (p. 273).

Many studies support the norms of cooperation. Hiltz's (1998) indicated that collaborative learning was necessary for online learning communities to provide emotional support, sociability, and information and instrumental aid. Roberts' (2005) list of benefits of collaborative learning included that students developed a social support system. And from the research on cohorts, it has been determined that, adult educators have noticed how cohorts and collaborative learning allowed for and challenged growth

for adult learners with different ways of knowing in three areas: supporting academic learning; supporting emotional and psychological well being, and providing an opportunity to broaden perspectives on themselves, each other, and their lives (Drago-Severson, 2004). Broadening perspectives leads us into the challenging nature that occurred within residency teams.

Challenge. Participants in the study expressed that because they had formed relationships and therefore developed a sense of trust with their residency team members, they were able to challenge each other to another level of understanding. They would "debate", "manipulate", "persuade", "constructively criticize" "banter" and "disagree." But all these statements were grounded with comments relating to how they "knew each other" and how there was a "human element." For example, many spoke of respect: "It was candid, it was frank, and it was debateful. You felt comfortable being – I don't really want to use the word confrontational but you could – you could say what you needed to say in a respectful way and know that you didn't loose anything."

The challenging comments would always be put into context of that other person because they had developed the background knowledge: "You could voice criticism of somebody else's opinion because you knew the person well enough." Many of the participants equated this level of comfort to challenge each other with having taken risks together and therefore developed trust with each other. This is supported in the literature; Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) point out that "where there are high levels of trust, people are more willing to take risks in such exchange" (p. 255). Being in a vulnerable situation,

as many felt by entering a masters program, and moving through it together seemed to create a culture of shared understanding. These members had a belief in the perceived openness of their teammates and that their challenges would be accepted.

Unexpected norm. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) point out that norms may have a dark side, "a pathological rigidity" (p. 255) that inhibits development of intellectual capital. Perhaps, this can account for the gender groupings that some participants discussed. I'm not necessarily suggesting that these groupings were negative, but the norm might have been set where this tendency to interact more so with their own gender was outside regular mixed interactions. This may have created a closed network that was not as open to idea generation and exchange. Gender differences have been the subject of many online research studies, however, since this was not an area that I was anticipating as a finding, I have not included anything in my literature review. However, it was not difficult for me to do a preliminary scan of the field to discover that there is vast information regarding gender and online communities.

For example, Kukulska-Hulme (2004) compiled limited research in the area of gender differences in asynchronous learning and one study that stood out for me was conducted by Blum; he found that males controlled the online environment and that there were clear gender differences in the tone, style and purpose of communication between the two groups. However, there is apparently conflicting results from many studies in the participation of female students in online discussions. Rovai and Baker (2005) conducted a study on men and women in various online courses to determine whether there was a

differing sense of community and level of perceived learning between the genders. Results indicated that females scored higher than males on both accounts. Interestingly, this study found that females dominated the online environment.

Fauske and Wade (2004) conducted a study of pre-service teachers to examine the discourse strategies used by men and women online. The research was fueled by previous studies that indicated very gendered discourse styles, such as males being hierachial and females being relational. However, their own research found few stereotypical gendered patterns with both genders using supportive (female style) and challenging (male style) discourse. Regardless of the discourse patterns and the supposed domination of the environment by one gender or another, Du, Zhang, Olinzock, and Adams (2008) found that students in their small groups of collaborative learners preferred mixed gender. However, there was no mention of males and females forming sub-groups in any other literature that I quickly scanned, and from what I read, all of the studies did include mixed gender groupings.

Concluding branches. The branches section included findings within the concepts of cohesiveness, communication, and norms. These group dynamic concepts may overlap and interrelate with each other. It must be noted again that they are not all encompassing of the relational aspects that can occur online but rather, they represent the experiences that this group of participants shared regarding their online learning community. Perhaps it is best concluded by quoting Wenger (1998):

> The community creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions and listen carefully … Community is an important element because learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head. (p. 28)

Leaves

Finally, if a tree is healthy, leaves will grow. I felt it very important to acknowledge that the participants overwhelmingly presented their experiences in very positive tones. I assumed, from my findings, that if the structural design factors were present, and the concepts or branches existed, then the students were satisfied. As well as satisfaction, another important aspect to acknowledge was that the participants expressed that co-creation of knowledge occurred. Through the continual sharing of ideas, feedback, and challenging each other's contributions a critical reflection occurred that contributed to the emergence and evolution of deep understandings. These inferred outcomes of the online community experience from this study are like the leaves on a tree, although I recognize that they may not be all-encompassing. From these findings one might conclude that if an online learning community is healthy, students will be satisfied and knowledge will be created.

This 'leaves' satisfaction

Participants in my study were overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience with their online learning community. Save for the frustration of not having met some of their instructors face-to-face, not one learner spoke of any other negative experiences. The focus on relationships that were built, developed, and maintained were exceedingly positive and affirmative of what I have witnessed in general in the program. Clear from the findings, was that much of the satisfied notions arose from the small group residency team structure.

Student satisfaction has been recognized as an aspect that influences students' general success and their decision to stay in a course or program (Chyung, 2002). The difficulty of incorporating and recognizing more appropriate markers of success with applied professional degrees than traditional degrees reveals itself most fully in concerns about grading. It is often a challenge in the first place to quantify graduate level work with grades; it is all the more challenging when grading measures research and writing skills that do not reflect students' abilities to apply their learning successfully in their workplaces. Therefore learner satisfaction becomes an important mark in the success of a program. "It is assumed that a measure of adult student satisfaction would provide an indication of institutional vitality" (Hendry, 1983, p. 48).

As was noticed in my study, instructors and fellow students played a significant role in the experiences of the participants and therefore, influenced their levels of satisfaction. This was reiterated through the literature: interaction among students and

between the instructor and students was critically important for student satisfaction and retention (King & Doerfert, 1996). As well, Hiltz (1998) mentioned benefits of collaborative learning that included the enhancement of student satisfaction with the learning and experience. And as I assumed, through the relationships that fostered positive interactions of all types enhancing or producing satisfaction, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that social presence is a good predictor of learner satisfaction.

And it 'leaves' knowledge construction

Along with notions of satisfaction, it was apparent from the participants that co-creation of meaning was experienced. Multiple perspectives were exchanged within the discussion forums where, for example, theory and concepts were contextualized within and from personal experiences. This ability to share, reflect, negotiate, and challenge within a safe environment becomes necessary for knowledge construction. Arguably, all of the above cannot be fulfilled if the online community is not healthy. In a context similar to my study, Barab, Thomas, and Merrill (2001) found that "the ability to share and reflect with others who have had rich life experiences becomes essential" and "contributed to the emergence and evolution of deep and grounded understandings" (p. 133).

Like Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) insist, where social capital creates intellectual capital because of a positive flow of information exchanges, so too does Rice (as cited in Harasim, 1990) believe that knowledge construction is the effect of computer-mediated communication systems. Due to flows of information into groups, out of groups, and

within groups, members are "freer to search for those information exchanges that provide satisfactory resources in return than they would be in typical organizations or communication contexts" (Rice in Harasim, p. 45). Although I cannot be assured from his findings that knowledge construction is *the* effect of computer-meditated communication systems, I am convinced that it supports my findings in that it may aid in the outcome of a positive learning community.

Conclusion

In summarizing this discussion chapter, I return to the definition of learning community that I adopted for the purpose of this study: "a group of students and at least one educator who, for a while and motivated by common vision and will, are engaged in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge, abilities and attitudes" (Vision of learners in the 21st century, 1998). The authors acknowledged that a learning community does not just happen but has to be built. They maintained that certain attitudes must exist for this to happen and the word to encompass them was "care." I felt that "care" was demonstrated, reciprocated, and nurtured within the online learning communities of these participants. They "cared" to share, trust, respect, support, learn about each other and the content, and most of all embrace, cultivate, and foster the relationships between each other and the instructors. This 'leafed' each participant satisfied.

Chapter Six: Contributions, Implications, Recommendations, and Reflections

Contributions to research, implications for practice, suggestions for further research, and my reflections on the research process are outlined in this chapter.

Contributions to the Research

I have mentioned that the literature on online technologies is still relatively young, yet there have been substantial strides in the last few years toward a deeper understanding. As such, my study was not innovative or "new." However, what I hope to have contributed is a contextual understanding of the implications that program or course structures can have on graduate students' experiences of online learning communities. I believe the strength of these structures, such as setting community expectations, face-to-face meetings, group size, the role of the instructor, and clear course expectations may have a positive impact on the relationships that are so crucial for an online learning community. It has already been said that online communities will not grow or sustain themselves (see for example Palloff & Pratt, 2007); I hope that my research will aid in emphasizing that important point but also assist educators in some areas that may advance them toward the goal of a community. In thinking toward the future, the next section outlines some suggestions based on my findings and discussion.

Implications for Practice

Although qualitative research makes no claims to generalize from the findings, the learnings from this study suggest some implications for practice. Many of these points

already exist in the literature; however, I felt it was important to (re)iterate what stood out from this study.

First, educational organizations planning to use online tools as a mechanism for learning are encouraged to think beyond the tightly organized structure of a distance education course that can sometimes stem from the seemingly stifling way the technology exists. Educators cannot mandate online learning communities, but they need to promote the growth, nurture the sustainability, and monitor the day-to-day existence. This can be done by acknowledging the expectation of a learning community with the students, dialoguing about what online communities mean to them and expectations for the existence of it, and then setting up, promoting, and continually monitoring a space for this community. This may seem like a tireless effort but participation from the students and the instructor(s) is essential.

Second, there are structural components that can be considered when designing an online course. To begin, where possible, establish introductions of instructors and students in a face-to-face setting. If this is not possible, perhaps consider the use of synchronous audio technology. Meeting face-to-face would be optimal; this provides the students with the visual and auditory cues that may make going online easier for "remembering" their fellow students and providing a deeper context. However, Palloff and Pratt (2007) maintain that "unless the initial meeting extends over a period of days and includes intentional activity geared toward community building, it is not likely to be effective" (p. 33). If synchronous audio is available, this at least will provide another

dimension for the students to learn about each other and the instructor. Sharing contexts and background information is imperative. Many students spoke of appreciating that they could "hear" the other students in their postings. Both face-to-face and audio allow students to express and receive such nuances as jokes and irony. Because text-based communication may constrain the "correct" interpretation, "knowing" someone may enlighten and reduce unintended misunderstandings.

Third, small group size is imperative. Given that, "text-based communication may contribute to information overload" (Harasim, 1990, p. 50) in order to promote knowledge construction, group size must be limited. Although I do not have a specific number of students that I can insist upon, I do suggest that anything under 10 would probably suffice. One participant made an interesting observation when she suggested that group sizes be limited to odd numbers so that dividing off in two sub-groups or cliques forming may be reduced because the dynamics remain more "fluid." Regardless, the important point is that the groups are formed and if a cohort setting exists, they should remain the same throughout the program. The cohesiveness that develops contributes to the interdependence that will exist among members. The longer they are together, the more "committed" they feel. This also suggests that, if possible, no new students are introduced into the groups.

Fourth, the role of the instructor is imperative for an online community to exist and thrive. The instructor must take the role of a facilitator. The instructor should be expected to (among other things) prompt, question, critique, guide, intervene, organize,

provide information, and even cheerlead! In order for this to happen, the instructor must be "present" or visible to the students through on-going and consistent postings. In the MES program, we ask the instructors to respond to every student's initial posting of a discussion forum. Our courses are divided into modules, and each module may have a guideline for the students to post two responses to the readings, therefore, in a class of 10 students, the instructor must make at least 20 postings. This brings up the important point that online instruction is very time-consuming. I suggest a low student-instructor ratio (around 10-1) where possible, if you are promoting and expecting a positive and successful online learning community.

Fifth, timing and expectations are important. Working full-time and completing a master's degree is difficult. Instructors should be clear about expectations for the timing of discussions and assignments. A couple of the participants expressed hesitation with how the technology organized the discussion forums. However, both were quick to say there were "good dialogues that happened" and "it was minor…it's something you just had to get used to." The points are important for online educators. Dawson talked about how, "the strands would get a little convoluted because you know you go off on one tangent and it was hard to go back 5 steps and make a comment sometimes and have it show up in the thread." Steve had a similar notion, "the problem is, if you don't get in early or if you're not the one that instigates it or responds to it, it's harder to feel part of that thread. So then you can have this great dialogue happening but you're just watching it from the outside." Therefore, expectations on how the technology works and of what the students can expect of their online dialogue experience should be communicated.

They should know that it's "okay" and "normal" to feel anxiety and hesitation about posting. But they should also be reassured that a culture of trust and support can be expected with a strong online community and therefore, the feelings of anxiety will likely dissipate as time passes.

Suggestions for Further Research

As I worked through the research journey, I came to "see" many more possible studies in the future. With online technologies still in their infancy and because there is a proliferation of alternate degree programs, we still have so much to learn. The following are suggestions for further inquiry that would inform our growing understanding of this field.

1. Individual versus group identity. Further research into the area of identity formation may be of value. How does an individual develop and maintain identity within a group culture? What is the role of norms in creating individual and group identity? Is age a factor in how individuals or groups create identity?

2. Gender groupings. I know that there is current research in the area of gender and online communities; however, because I did not include it in my literature review, I am unable to comment on where possible gaps might exist. As such, I can only offer my limited perspective suggestions. Further research into the area of gender roles in small groups over time may be valuable. Specifically, do individuals within a mixed gender group tend to gravitate toward interacting more often with

colleagues of their own gender? If so, are the interactions that occur across the genders of a different nature than the ones that occur within gender? Do the types of interactions differ if it is a single gender group? How does gender influence the creation of social capital?

3. Small group dynamics. What are special features of "forced community" like the master's cohort or residency teams? What are the factors that may cultivate a trusting environment for constructive feedback and sustainability? How does diversity (ie. race, class, sexual orientation) of the student population affect experiences in a forced community?

4. Support services. Many of the students in the MES program receive some kind of support while going through their master's program. This study established that emotional support was appreciated from both residency team members and instructors. However, completing a master's degree while working full-time is a tremendous undertaking; what support services could they have used beyond the one's that might already exist for them? Do support structures impact satisfaction levels and/or completion rates? Should a needs assessment be done to determine what support services are needed?

5. Interestingly, in what can be an obvious and sometimes negative topic, the subject of grades did not enter any of the conversations once. In contrast, Conrad's (2002b) dissertation study, which had a similar design and context as mine, found

that "learners raised the subjects of marks repeatedly" (p. 94) and that marks were important in their decisions to participate, they were seen as motivators, and they resulted in a perceived competitiveness among group members. What are the notions of competition versus collaboration?

6. Future of an online community. Many of the participants expressed that they would like to somehow stay connected to their fellow residency team members after the program is completed. What is the natural journey of an online cohort learning community? What are the long-term expectations? Do they come to fruition? What are some of the specific examples or recommendations around how they can stay in touch? And what, if any, influence do grades have on this process?

Reflections

My experience as a researcher was, not surprisingly, an amazing journey. Working in a program that prides itself on the impact that the site-based research project provides to our students, made me thirsty for my own research experience. I have lived vicariously through the MES students until my own thesis. I knew a lot about literature reviews, ethics, different methods and methodologies all second-hand. I was eager to experience it myself.

Conducting the research was exciting but nerve-racking. What if my questions yielded blank stares? And although I knew my participants well, I felt an added pressure

that they might be judging me and the process because I was working in the program that taught them. However, it was nothing but comfortable and enjoyable. Having a relationship with these individuals made it more like a friendly conversation and much less intimidating than I expected.

I identify with my participants in that they are usually working full-time and taking their master's degree part-time, while still managing a life on the side. I appreciated the time they took out of their lives to be interviewed. This provided me with a glimpse into their multi-dimensional lives as I conducted the research in locations that fit for their schedules: at their work, at my office, on the phone, or in a coffee shop. They were always scheduled around events that were taking place both before and after the interviews. This, along with other things, left me with the notion of how they carried out their own master's degree – by literally fitting it in around everything else – one hour (if lucky) at a time.

I learned a lot more than just what the findings represented from the interviews. An interruption of our interview probably imitates the experience of how it was for these full-time educators to work online. You sneak in a few minutes here and there and suddenly you are interrupted because work comes first or family comes first, and often you have to start back at the beginning of your train of thought. You can't simply pick up from that exact moment and carry on – your mind has just journeyed down a completely different path – and now you must put in the effort to get back to the previous one. As we

talked, moments happened where we were interrupted and finishing the exact same sentence became near impossible.

My participants were articulate and expressive, as such I was thrilled to discover how enjoyable it was to work with the data. Although transcribing was tedious, it was obvious to me shortly after, how beneficial it was when I started analyzing the data more closely. I relished the moments when I cut out quotes that so closely expressed similar ideas. This gave me the confidence to work smoothly through the data analysis process. Ultimately, the findings confirmed what I had expected, save for one. The findings also reaffirmed that many of the structures embedded within the MES program are beneficial and positive for the students.

The unexpected finding of gender groupings was, clearly, interesting for me. I didn't expect it because I have never noticed anything online that would indicate small groups were "formed" by gender. The interactions that caused these participants to mention it must have happened through other communication methods. This really made me stop and ask myself, "What else am I blind to, such as race or class issues?" Although it was not a strong finding, as presented earlier, further research into this area would perhaps be beneficial to understand the sub-groupings and why they develop within larger closed networks. I also admit that I was not expecting such a large emphasis to be placed on meeting the instructional staff face-to-face and the positive benefits that experience can generate. For our MES program, this awareness is significant and

something that may affect our introduction of non-residency teaching staff to the students. This also has implications for other online programs, as presented above.

Writing the research was the culmination of a solidifying activity that bound it all together. It was exciting to see the chapters form and take life. The process has been a positive journey, full of learnings beyond this text-based representation. The same, I'm sure, can be said about the online experiences of these participants.

Final Conclusion

We ask our MES students to come prepared to share a story of teaching in their first summer residency. The story can be humorous or serious; we try not to attach many guidelines. We ask that they share these stories on the first day as an "icebreaker" activity. At the end of the class, we discuss what we're heard and we conduct a preliminary analysis of these comments. Ultimately, every group arrives at the same theme: the stories are all about relationships.

They do not write about the best math lesson they developed or how many objectives they obtained with their class – they write about experiences with students, colleagues, and sometimes parents. The focus is about the people and what they experience together. I feel that through this research study, which encompasses my own story of teaching, I came to the same "conclusion" when I asked: What are the experiences of online graduate students in a cohort setting? What was it like for them to

experience the face-to-face residency and then go online? What was it like to engage with each other in small groups?

During the interviews conducted for my research study, they responded that it was about the people. They spoke of the relationships that developed, endured, and sustained them through their masters' degrees. They spoke of building rapport, support, trust, sharing, and respecting each other's time. They spoke of their hesitation to go online at first, even though they spent three weeks in a summer residency together, but made it very clear that the hesitation dissipated and the conversations included more self-disclosure with more "rich" and "challenging" remarks. Many participants pointed out that this would not be the situation if they were not motivated or did not continue to get to "know" each other. The participants spoke of the instructors and how they appreciated their presence and support but also how they liked to meet them if possible to initiate the relationship. Ultimately, their online learning community "cared"; they shared values and shared understanding that led to a very satisfying experience, knowledge sharing, and different levels of knowledge construction.

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Appendix A: Information Letter for Interview Participants

Date _____

Dear _____,

My name is Natasja Larson and I am the Program Administrator for the Master of Education in Educational Studies Program. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in my thesis research project regarding online learning communities in cohort settings. This study will explore the experiences of an online learning community in a graduate education context. Specifically, I want to explore the experiences of belonging to a cohort and a Residency Team. The structural aspect of face-to-face residencies will also be explored as it relates to experiencing an online learning community.

I am inviting you to participate in my research. If you are interested please respond by email to me at nlarson@ualberta.ca before Friday, February 15, 2008. Your participation is voluntary and will, in no way, have any influence on you as a student or former student in the MES program

I will be conducting one-to-one or individual interviews. The interviews will take approximately 45 minutes at a location that is convenient for us or via telephone. You will be able to stop the interview process at any time by telling me and/or you can choose to not answer any of the questions without harm or penalty to you.

The interview session will be audio-taped but there will be no other research personnel other than myself. There will be no foreseeable harm in participating and the benefit will hopefully be an interesting conversation around online learning experiences. The information you provide may be used in the future for published research articles and/or conferences.

Data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. In order for you to verify the content of the interview discussion I will distribute a copy of my interpretation and analysis to you by e-mail (preferably your U of A account or another agreed upon address), requesting feedback and/or approval of the work. In the event that I want to use specific quotes in my final report, I will also provide you with relevant portion(s) of the transcripts that I want to use. You will only receive copies of your own transcribed material.

Although no value judgments will be placed on your responses and no evaluation will be made of your participation, as a participant you have the right to opt out of the interview session any time before or during the session without penalty or judgment. The information that you shared will not be included in my thesis. You also have the right to not answer any of the questions. If you choose to complete the interview, and later decide that you want to withdraw your comments, you will have up to four weeks after the

interview to notify me so that I receive this request before I merge the data. This shall be communicated to me in writing. Your information will then be destroyed.

To respect privacy, the interview will be held in a private, neutral, quiet place where we will not be interrupted or via the telephone. If you agree to the interview, the method you prefer will be conducted; that is, either face-to-face, email or by telephone. The session will happen after work hours. I will not divulge who participated in the interviews through any conversations and although the session will be recorded, I will keep the tape locked in filing cabinet in my work office or home office (both of which are locked when I am not there) for five years, at which time they will be destroyed. Any written notes taken during the session will also be locked in the filing cabinet and Word documents containing data will be stored on my Education File Server space that requires my CCID to login. This information will not be distributed and only you may have access to your own data for verification. Although I intend to do the transcription of the interviews, in the event that I hire a transcriber, he/she will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Upon writing up the results of the research, no names will be included in the document. Contexts that you provide that may allude to a participant's identity will also carefully be excluded. It will be clear to the readers that you are/were a student of the MES program but due to the number of students in the program I do not foresee individual identities being obvious. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms will be used in transcripts and all other written representations of the data. You will have the option of selecting a pseudonym; if you do not select a pseudonym, I will assign one to you.

If any concerns, complaints, questions, or consequences arise from the interview session, please do not hesitate to contact me, Natasja Larson at nlarson@ualberta.ca or (780) 492-3421. Or alternately you can contact my supervisor, Randy Wimmer at rwimmer@ualberta.ca.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Thank you for considering my invitation to participate in my research. I look forward to hearing from you before Friday, February 15, 2008 if you would like to be included.

Sincerely,

Natasja Larson
MES Program Administrator
Faculty of Education
University of Alberta
(780) 492-3421

Appendix B: Written Consent Form

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the interview process and that you agree. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up to one month after the interview, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Evaluator: Natasja Larson
(780) 492-3421

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (780) 492-3751.

Two copies of this form are provided, one to be signed and returned and one for you to keep for your own records as the participant.

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Evaluator

Natasja Larson

_____	_____	_____
	(Signature)	(Date)

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What is your current work position?
2. How many years have you been an educator?
3. How comfortable were you with technology/computers when you began the MES program?
4. Did you have any graduate experience (online or face-to-face) prior to the first MES face-to-face residency?
5. Why did you choose the MES program?
6. Think back to your first online course after the summer residency; what was it like to go online after the face-to-face experience?
7. What was the online environment like for you in general?

I'm going to define Residency Teams and Cohorts. These terms will be used in the following questions. For this study, Residency Teams are described as small groups of around 10 students that, in their functional sense, stay together from the beginning of the program to the end, excluding option courses. Cohorts consist of a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences. So for the MES this would pertain to the large group that you complete your core courses with.

8. Reflect on being a member of a residency team in the MES program. What was the significance or value in that structure for you?
9. How was that similar to or different from being a member of the cohort group?
10. Can you tell me about the nature of the dialogue that occurred online in your residency teams?
11. Can you tell me about the engagement of the content within the courses?
12. What was it like for you to engage with the different instructors online?
13. What do you think the future holds for your residency team?
14. Is there anything else you want to add?

Please feel free to phone me or get in touch with me via email if you think of anything else that you would like to comment on.